Omae o Otaku ni Shiteyaru kara, Ore o Riajuu ni Shitekure! Volume 1

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 1.

村上凛
●むらかみりん

第２回ネクストファンタジア大賞にて本作で金賞受賞、デビュー。
1月16日生まれ。A型。しがない会社員。趣味はカラオケと音楽制作。好きなものはカレー、甘いもの、アニソン、女性アイドル。
自分自身の学生時代の失敗談などを小ネタとして盛り込みながら楽しんで書かせて頂きました。少しでも読んで下さった方の心に何か残るような物になれば幸いです。

おまえをオタクにしてやるから、俺をリア充にしてくれ！

Omae wo **OTAKU** ni shiteyaru kara
Ore wo **RIAJU** ni shite kure !

村上凛
Rin Murakami

イラスト：あなぽん
カバーデザイン：伸童舎

ファンタジア文庫

む-1
1-1
おまえをオタクにしてやるから、俺をリア充にしてくれ！
村上凛
ファンタジア文庫

あたし？

長谷川翠
Midori Hasegawa

おまえをオタクにしてやるから、俺をリア充にしてくれ！

Omae wo *OTAKU* ni shiteyaru kara
Ore wo *RIAJU* ni shite kure !

はあ？　あんたがリア充になれるわけないじゃん？

おまえの方こそ、オタクになれるわけねえだろ？

恋ヶ崎桃
Momo Koigasaki

柏田直輝
Naoki Kasiwada

◀ 二人の口論は左ページに続く！

コスプレをして……
「せっかく気合入れて人生初コスプレに挑戦したってのにもう散々よ……。鈴木君にはありえないって言われるし……」
「はっきり言って、あれはコスプレとは呼べねえぞ。ちゃんとヅラ被れ。そんな髪型のキャラいないし」
「あーもう、細かいことグダグダうるさいなあ！」
萌えアニメを見て……
「全裸の子供が出てくるアニメなんて法的に放映していいわけ!?」
「あ、正確に言うとそのシーンはDVD加筆修正されてるから放映はしてねえんだけど……」
「オタク変態キモい！ロリコンキモい！」
「お前の好きな鈴木だってオタクでロリコンなんだぞ……？」
秋葉原に美少女ゲームを買いに……
「まさか人生の中であんなゲームを買う日が来るとは思ってもみなかったわ……」
「お前の服装、秋葉じゃクソ浮いてたなー」
「私服がオッサンみたいなあんたに言われたくないわよ」
「うっ……」

デートに行って……
「仮にもデートで、試着した女の子を前に黙ってるなんてマジありえないんですけどっ。だからあんたはモテないのよ！」
「いや、あれは、お前があまりに……」
「え？」
「い、いや、あまりに自分勝手でムカついたらか、何も言葉が出てこなかったんだよ！」

Chapter 1

"Tina is going to sing this song for you, my beloved big brother, so I want you to listen to it!"

On the TV display, a 2D **Bishoujo**[1] was saying cute lines with a blushing face. Immediately after that line, a light melody started playing.

"Hey, when will this get interesting?"

The **Bishoujo** beside me twirled her hair around her finger in boredom as she watched the moving pictures from the corner of her eye.

"You were the one who said you wanted to watch it, so stop playing with your hair and pay attention to it! If you don't pay attention, you're going to miss an important scene!"

The anime had been running on the TV display for merely fifteen minutes.

"How can such an anime, with just children singing and dancing, have any important scenes?"

Said the **Bishoujo** beside me as she languidly played with her hair..... though it's just a nice-sounding term if I call her one. With her overly-luxurious fake eyelashes, thick makeup, brightly permed hair and flashy nails ---

the female of the human species, known as **Gyaru**[2], stood there. Her appearance was a complete mismatch with the transformation idol anime aimed at little girls, " Lovely Idol Tinker Tina", that was currently running on the TV screen.

"Haah ~..... you're the one who told me that Suzuki-kun is into this anime, so I went to rent it from TSUTAYA[3], but what does Suzuki-kun find interesting about this anime?"

"Say that only after you've at least finished one full episode."

We were in the AV room and it was after school hours.

Since this was the only place we could watch a DVD, I, Kashiwada Naoki, and the **Gyaru** in front of me..... Koigasaki Momo, were watching a rented anime DVD here without even getting permission from the school.

"It's been incredibly boring for the past fifteen minutes. Hey, can you explain what's the appeal of this anime? Summarize it in thirty seconds. Since you're an **Otaku**[4], you should be able to do that, right?"

"No, it's not like I'm a **Lolicon**[5], so I can't tell what's so appealing about this anime..... Weren't you the one who didn't want to watch this alone and forced me to watch it with you!"

"Eh, hey, are you insinuating that Suzuki-kun is a **Lolicon**? Can you please seriously stop that kind of allegation!"

"I'm not insinuating, the fact is, he is a Lolic..... gweh."

I felt my neck getting constricted from my necktie, which was tightening from a strong tug.

"Huh!? What did you just say!?"

After getting my breath back, I could see some students passing by outside the door window. Furthermore, it seemed like they were looking at us.

"Geh! Do people actually pass by here! Don't tell me they can see us watching anime from outside.....? If they realize that I'm watching an anime after school, won't my **Otaku** secret get found out!?"

Upon my clamoring, Koigasaki suddenly pressed the ' Stop' button and stopped the DVD.

"Aah, this is really boring. Can't be bothered with it."

She took out the DVD and put it back in its case.

Saved.....! With this, my **Otaku** secret is safe.....

If I got found out here, then all the trouble I took to become a closet **Otaku** ever since entering high school would go down the drain.

Koigasaki must have seen how upset I was and gave up watching for my sake. My, doesn't she have some unexpected good points?

As I was feeling a brief moment of relief,

"Hey, Koigasaki..... what's that....."

Koigasaki took out another DVD from her bag.

"I also rented this from TSUTAYA. This is an anime that both you and Suzuki-kun are hooked on, right? Didn't you help me ask him about it? You can be quite useful at times. This better be interesting, though!"

My jaw dropped upon seeing the anime title on the case of that DVD.

"Stop! Just not that anime! I mean, you should at least watch this at home!"

"If I watch this at home, it'll be terrible if my family suddenly walks in on me, so that's impossible."

"It's even worse if you watch this in school, duh!"

At the end of my futile attempts to stop her, the anime started playing on the TV screen.

Right at the outset, a bunch of beautiful girls appeared on the screen.

"Wh-What's this....."

Koigasaki froze instantly as she looked at the screen.

This anime could be said to be challenging the limits of a Free-To-Air channel, a turn-on, erotic late night anime. On top of that, the DVD was a revised edition that was even more erotic to the extreme.

The childish girly anime earlier was many times more preferable.

"What's this! Are you an idiot!? **Otakus** are creepy! No, not just creepy, but gross! To get into this kind of anime... ... I seriously can't believe you **Otakus**!"

With her face beet-red, Koigasaki threw the remote control, makeup pouch, and drink carton pack in her hands at me.

"Ouch! What the hell are you doing! Wait, turn the thing off, turn it off!"

While enduring the attacks from Koigasaki, I frantically pressed the 'Stop' button on the remote control and stopped the anime.

"Jeez, this is really horrible! I didn't intend to rent this kind of anime....."

"Who's the horrible one, you hysterical woman! It seems really impossible for you to become an **Otaku** if you react so repulsed from an anime like this!"

I suddenly snapped and threw my rage on Koigasaki.

"What's that, why did you say it's impossible.....?"

Koigasaki's expression contorted suddenly on hearing my words.

"Just be more cooperative! Didn't you say that I shall help you become a **Riajuu**[6], and that you'll help me become an **Otaku** so I can get closer to Suzuki-kun!? We have an agreement, right!? Don't you dare tell me you've forgotten about it!"

That's right, we are indeed bonded by such an agreement.

Aah, how did things turn out this way.....

Even though I just wanted to enjoy my peaceful high school life.....

And if luck is on my side, I hoped to get a cute, conservative girlfriend and become a **Riajuu**.

But instead..... nobody could have imagined that my high school life would be turned upside down by this violent, **Sweet(LOL)**[7] **Gyaru**.

Everything started after I met this girl, when my high school life ended up getting messed up.....

Chapter 2

"Huh? How could I like him. Seriously, could you stop joking?"

During the unforgettable summer of the 3rd year of my middle school, on a certain day after school ---

I heard a cute voice that I was familiar with.

"I see, that's a relief! I was so worried when I thought Aikawa might like that **Otaku** ~"

"Hey, could you stop that already?"

"Well, you often talk to Kashiwada, don't you?"

"No, it's just that, I thought it might be fun so I just happened to talk to him."

"Ah, so you were just playing around with him?"

"Of course! That's the only reason why I'd do that!"

Along with the conversation, the sound of merry laughter rang out from several girls.

I was on my way back to my classroom to get something I'd forgotten. However, I could do nothing but stand rooted to the spot after hearing the voices from inside.

The female student named Aikawa Kizuna in the classroom right now was someone I'd had a crush on until that moment.

Is the voice coming out of the classroom right now really the same kind voice that I've always been hearing? I couldn't help but doubt my ears then.

She's really kind. Why would a cute girl like her talk to a lame **Otaku** like me? I had always found that baffling.

But.

"There's no way I would like him."

"I just find it fun to play around with him."

The words I'm hearing now are her true feelings.

Those words of hers had always been echoing in my head.

"I mean, aren't those **Otakus** way too creepy?"

"Yeah, their conversations are somewhat overly heated , they're also noisy and goddamn annoying, and their creepiness is contaminating the entire classroom as well."

The other girls with Aikawa continued their insults. The word "they" in their conversation was obviously referring to us **Otakus**.

It's true that my friends and I would have our **Otaku** conversations in the classroom. But we didn't realize the people around us could hear us, and I would never have imagined that the others would find us creepy and annoying.

Right then, for the first time, I realized how the people around us view us **Otakus**.

And it was a such a shock to me that I couldn't move away from that place.

That very day, when I accidentally learned how the girl I

liked thought of me, and how the other girls badmouthed me by calling **Otakus** creepy, was the worst day of my life.

After that, the rest of my middle school life went by dully.

As much as possible, in order to avoid being thought of as creepy, I tried to be conscious of the people around me, refrained from doing anything that would stand out, and spent the rest of my school life in that manner. Even when my **Otaku** friends were having their **Otaku** talks, being conscious of my surroundings, I stopped joining in.

The girl whom I used to like, Aikawa Kizuna, still talked to me, but after hearing her true feelings, even when she talked to me, I could no longer respond properly the way I had in the past.

Just like that, my precious middle school life came to an end with those most unpleasant memories.

Chapter 3

I was awoken by the noisy alarm clock.

I'm not a morning person, so one ring of the alarm clock usually wouldn't be enough to wake me up, but this day was special. I managed to wake up with a clear, refreshed mind.

It was the day of my high school entrance ceremony.

I wondered how long I had waited for this day.

I, Kashiwada Naoki, was determined to live a completely new life starting from this very day.

In other words, from today onward, I shall become a 『closet **Otaku**』.

I had sworn to myself that I shall never again engage in heated **Otaku** talk in class, nor talk about manga and **Galge**[8] and **Doujinshi**[9].

When I learned in middle school the truth that **Otakus** were labeled as creepy people, it was really a great shock to me. I was on the verge of becoming unable to trust women.

Even though I was an **Otaku**, I was of course still interested in real women, and I wanted to fall in love one day.

Therefore, I had decided that I would bury my past and spend my high school days as a closet **Otaku**.

To accomplish that, I purposely took the entrance exam of a high school which none of my acquaintances would be attending.

I took care of my attire so as not to give myself away as an **Otaku**, in order to get a girlfriend and become a **Riajuu** in the end --- with that as my final goal, I started making preparations for my high school debut.

I changed my glasses for contacts, and during the spring break before the school entrance ceremony, I visited a hairdressing salon instead of the usual 1000-yen-in-10 minutes barbershop[10].

I had also changed the standby display of my cellphone from a game character I liked to the photo of a stylish-looking scenery, and also removed all the cellphone straps that I'd bought from an anime shop.

My resolve was the real thing.

Wearing my brand new uniform, I took a deep breath.

From today onward, I shall begin my **Riajuu** life.

I arrived at the station for the school I was attending, Fujimi High, and got off the train.

During middle school, I attended a school in the local vicinity and this was my first time taking a train to school. I exited the gantry.

Right now, I held a faint hope for the school life that was about to begin for me. I wondered what kind of girls there would be in high school.

My ideal type would be a clean, cute girl with a kind heart. I'd heard that high school girls these days dye their hair brown and perm it, though I had no idea why they would want to do that. If I were to get a girlfriend, she should have straight black hair with a clean, neat look. I believed without the shadow of a doubt that straight black hair was the hairstyle that can bring out the absolute beauty of a Japanese woman.

On leaving the station, I saw a girl wearing my school's uniform walking in front of me. And that girl had the very same beautiful straight black hair that I had just painted in my thoughts. What great timing. Unconsciously, my eyes ended up following her.

Her long black hair that reached even her back fluttered in the spring breeze. Even from afar, I could tell that she had a slim figure and a pair of slender legs. Her posture, and even the way she walked, was beautiful. Even though it was just her back, everything matched my ideal. Aah, I want to take a look at the face that belonged to that beautiful back. I prayed for a chance for her to turn her body around, but it seemed like it wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

At that moment, I heard running footsteps from behind. A little girl with a school backpack passed me. Is there also an elementary school by the same station? She was a little girl who was probably in grade one, two or three.

Just when I realized that the little girl had passed me, she went on to pass the female student who was walking in front of me.

She sure is persistent, I thought in admiration, but, just as she had passed the female student, she fell hard over onto the ground.

Uwaah, that looked like it hurt. Will she cry, I thought worriedly, and the female student who was walking in front of me hurried to the little girl's side. She knelt and helped the little girl up.

As it happened five meters in front of me, I couldn't hear their words, but the female student seemed to have spoken something to the little girl.

As I continued walking, I got closer and closer to the pair. I couldn't help but feel concerned and as I turned my eyes toward them, I saw the female student brushing dirt off the little girl's clothes.

"Are you ok now?"

I heard her words. Even though only the side view of her face was visible from my position, I could see a kind smile surface on the female student as she spoke to the little girl.

"You didn't cry at all. That's really brave of you."

She patted the head of the little girl. "Uhm!" Replied the little girl energetically. Aah, how wonderful. Even her voice is beautiful.

Perhaps because I had been looking at them for a little too long, she seemed to have noticed my gaze and for an instant, she turned to face me.

For the first time, I was able to catch a complete view of her face.

I was surprised.

She had really fair skin. And well-defined fine features .

Just an instant's look at her beautiful face took my breath away.

She immediately turned back to the little girl. I too continued walking, and left the female student and little girl behind me.

My heartbeat became more and more rapid.

An angel.

I saw an angel.

With a kindness that allowed her to go forward and help that little girl without hesitation, and a beautiful face that can fascinate anyone who just catches a glimpse of it. With those two traits combined, that female student was nothing short of an angel.

Is it ok for a girl like her to exist in this world, I wondered.

I was really grateful to be in the same school as that angel. At the same time, more desires were born within me. I wanted to know her name. I wanted to get close to her. While I didn't know if she was in the same year as me, if possible, I wanted to be in the same class as her.

As both hope and uncertainty swelled up in me, the entrance ceremony at the gymnasium ended.

I moved towards my assigned classroom. I took my seat in class. My seat was beside the window on the left, and two rows from behind.

Immediately after taking my seat, I looked around the classroom in search of the female student I'd seen this morning.

However, since I was sitting two rows from behind, I could only see the backs of the majority of the students. And since there were a number of female students with straight black hair, I could not ascertain a thing just from viewing their backs.

In the first place, I didn't even know whether she was a freshman or not, and I knew full well that to have her in the same class as me would be akin to a miracle, but.

It happened in the midst of the self-introduction session, where each of the students would step forward and introduce themselves, as prompted by the homeroom teacher.

A miracle happened.

The female student who sat in the middle column right in front of the teacher's desk stood up from her seat and proceeded towards the front of the teacher's desk. That face..... was that of the angel I'd seen this morning.

I was so touched and happy that my hands started trembling.

With her black hair flowing in a regal manner, she appeared before the teacher's desk.

I could only catch a glimpse of her this morning, and once again upon looking at her, I found her to be really beautiful.

Her fair skin and clear large eyes. Her lashes, long enough to cast shadows. That lustrous straight black hair . And her beautiful, slender form. Everything turned into a dignified, picturesque view.

Not just me alone, but probably all the guys in class were staring at her, I guessed.

Her looks, the air around her, everything about her, she was totally my type. Even though I'd only just met her, I was already strongly attracted to her.

At that moment.

"I'm Hasegawa Midori, nice to meet you."

After a short and curt introduction, she headed back to her seat without a shred of hesitation.

Even though the homeroom teacher had told us that we could say what we like in our self-introductions, everyone had at the very least given their birthplace or the place they were living. And those who talked more would supplement with their hobbies or the clubs that they were planning to join, trying to impress on the rest their desire to blend in with the class.

By the way, she didn't even smile for a moment, went back to her seat a little too promptly, and just like that, her self-introduction ended. Like a completely different person from the kind girl who had smiled at the child this morning, she radiated a cold aura.

The classmates could only become dumbfounded after hearing her, and, forgetting to even clap, the class returned to silence.

Even thought she was a beauty, she was a strange and unsociable person.

That was the impression of 『Hasegawa Midori fixed in the minds of the class on the first day of school.

However, my feelings did not waver.

I was getting increasingly interested in her.

Is she a shy person, or did she have stage fright, or is she originally an unsociable person?

But, I wanted to believe that the face I'd seen on my way to school this morning was her real self.

I wanted to talk to her.

I wanted to see her smile again.

I was able to find someone I like on the very first day of school... maybe my high school life will have a promising future.

From that day onward, my eyes were always following Hasegawa Midori.

*

It was a week after entering school.

As I was consciously cautious of what I did, nobody had yet to find out that I was an **Otaku**.

I managed to somehow make a friend. He was Kiritani , whose seat was behind me. He was sociable and easy to talk to, and we would talk immediately during breaks. Of course, unlike me, he wasn't an **Otaku**, but quite a normal guy.

On that day, the homeroom teacher said it was time to decide on the class representative, so we started a discussion. However, there were no candidates nominated, and we were at our wits' end.

"This won't end if we don't decide, you know ~?"

Despite the pressure from the homeroom teacher, still, no one stepped forward.

A buzz started in the class. Surely, everyone was thinking, "will someone volunteer?". Of course, I was also one of them.

At that moment, a hand rose.

I looked at the person who raised her hand and was surprised.

It was Hasegawa Midori.

She had volunteered herself as a candidate for the class rep.

"Hasegawa-san, are you willing to become the class rep?"

"Yes."

Of course, no one objected and it was thus decided.

The discussion ended and it was recess time.

I had a few questions in my mind and thus turned around and muttered to Kiritani.

"It's puzzling, isn't it..... Hasegawa doesn't look like the kind who would try to stand out, so why did she volunteer to become the class rep?"

"Kashiwada, you're always talking about Hasegawa. What's the deal? Are you in love with her?"

"Hey, don't say that so loudly!"

I frantically looked around me. After ascertaining that no one had heard that, I felt relieved.

Up till now, I hadn't talked to Hasegawa even once. Correction. Actually, I had yet to talk to any of the girls in class. My plan of getting a girlfriend in high school was in dire straits.

"Give it up. She might be a beauty, but she's giving off an atmosphere that says, 'I don't even want to talk to worthless people', isn't she? She definitely won't entertain you. During breaks, she doesn't even talk to anyone and just absorbs herself in her book."

Indeed, just as Kiritani said, every part of Hasegawa Midori's body was radiating an aura that made approaching her difficult. She always had a cold expression on her, and I had yet to see her talking happily to any of the classmates.

She would either be reading her book by herself at her seat during recesses, or she would be quietly taking care

of class rep chores. Her actions could only be seen as deliberately distancing herself from the rest of the class.

However, I never thought of that as her true self. Because I'd seen it. Her kindness. Her smile.

Even now, she was earnestly erasing the blackboard of the writings in the last lesson. While looking at her constantly, I realized that the class rep's responsibilities basically involved mostly menial tasks, it seemed.

"Hasegawa."

At that moment, Hasegawa was called by the homeroom teacher. She stopped her task of erasing the blackboard halfway, and walked out of the classroom.

"..... all right!"

I gave out an utterance of determination and stood up from my seat.

"Ah? Kashiwada, what's wrong?"

While Kiritani called out from behind, I walked to the front of the blackboard. Then, I finished erasing the blackboard that was half-erased by Hasegawa. On her behalf, who was summoned by the homeroom teacher.

Hasegawa Midori returned just as I was sitting back down on my seat. She then looked at the completely erased, clean blackboard in wonder. As if she had realized that someone had done it for her, she looked around her.

She looked in my direction for an instant. ..... it seemed to me.

"Hasegawa has realized that it was me."

"No no no!? There's no way she could have realized that, right!?"

What kind of fantasy world are you in?, even when Kiritani said that in disgust, I was still absorbed in thoughts of "Hasegawa realized that I was the one who did it for her". Though I myself did not know how I could have concluded that without any basis.

After that, I started secretly helping out with Hasegawa's chores as a class rep.

It would be the best if I could just offer my help openly to her, but regrettably, I did not possess such a **Riajuu** skill. Rather, it would be embarrassing.

Since then, I continued helping Hasegawa with her chores as a class rep. The chores I helped out with were mainly erasing the blackboard and writing on the back blackboard the lesson timetable for the day. These were the only two tasks I could do secretly while Hasegawa was not around.

While I did them when she wasn't looking, I kept believing that Hasegawa did realize who it was, and continued helping her every day.

*

It was two weeks after the start of school.

The cliques in class had already been formed. Aside from Kiritani, I did manage to talk a little to other guys as well. However, I had yet to talk to any girls, and even for guys, I had been mostly talking only to Kiritani.

Even now, it seemed like Hasegawa was by herself most of the time. While I'd considered talking to her, I obviously didn't have the guts to do it. It was all I could do just helping her from the shadows with her class rep responsibilities.

In addition, she radiated a cold aura that made talking to her difficult, confirming that it would be difficult to get a notch closer to her.

Hasegawa was a perfect superhuman. Even though there had been no tests yet, so I couldn't know her results , judging from the answers she gave during class when she was called, she must be an ace student in all subjects. On top of that, I was able to witness her excellent athletic ability during P.E. class. Guys and girls each have their separate P.E. lessons, but during health education classes , since my seat was just next to the window, I was able to see the girls in the courtyard engaging in their P.E activities. Each health education lesson, I ignored what was going on in class and was absorbed by what went on

outside the window. Each time, the girls were asked to run five laps around the courtyard, and Hasegawa would definitely be either the first or the second to finish.

She was certainly someone gifted in both beauty and brains, and excelled in both studies and sports. In **Galge**, heroines with such specs would exist, but it was hard to believe that such a girl existed in the real world.

That perfection, without letting her guard down, which made her even more devoid of openings, was what isolated her from the rest.

On that day, due to the teacher's circumstances, the fourth period became a self-study period. I wanted to talk to Kiritani and turned around, but before I could even begin, he proudly stated that he'd only had two hours of sleep the previous night, went on to prone himself on the desk, and was fast asleep.

Left with no choice, I took out the novel that I'd just bought yesterday from my bag, and opened it at the page marked by my bookmark.

As soon as I'd opened up the page, I hurriedly closed shut the book having realized the bookmark was **Otaku**-ish in nature. Shit, I got the wrong one. This was a light

novel that I read exclusively on the train while commuting to school. While I had two novels inside my bag, regrettably, as they were both of the same size, and since I used the same book cover jackets for both, it was easy to mix them up. I used a trading card of a game I liked as the bookmark for the light novel and a normal bookmark I got from the bookstore for the mystery novel to differentiate them, so once I saw the bookmark, I would be able to tell which was which right away.

I looked around immediately. Fortunately, no one appeared to have seen my trading card.

As a closet **Otaku** bent on hiding his secret, reading a light novel in class would be incredibly foolish of me. After reflecting on the need to be more careful, this time round, I look out the mystery novel paperback that I'd just bought yesterday from my bag, and opened it.

However, just as I was about to start reading it, with my eyes falling on the words of the page, the girls to my right started a noisy conversation and I couldn't focus at all.

"Hey you know, isn't Momo treading dangerous ground? The other day, I saw her with a salaryman at Shibuya."

"Seriously!? Is she prostituting herself? Or is she fooling around? She has always been negative towards it though."

How should I put this, in short, it was a conversation of the creatures known as **Gyaru**. It was a species that I had never in my life come into contact with.

I ended up hearing a conversation that I didn't want to hear, so even as I was staring at the words in my book, the contents didn't seem to register in my brain, which was troubling to me.

"Do you think she really was five-timing during middle school? A girl in class C who went with her to the same school said that, it seems."

"Eh, I don't think that's true, do you? She herself denied it."

"But Momo never says anything about her love life at all. I think that's pretty suspicious."

Five-timing during middle school..... if that was true, she would be a real slut. And prostituting herself to a salaryman? High school girls these days are really scary.

"Hey, what're you girls talking about?"

"Momo!?"

At that moment, the voice of a newly appeared character added to the mix. It seemed like the said person ..... whose name seemed to be Momo, joined the conversation. What an unexpected development. I mean, you shouldn't really be gossiping about your classmate with such loud voices. **Gyaru**s sure have guts.

"Ahh, Momo, you really have no boyfriend?"

"Huuh? Didn't I say that I don't have one? Why do you ask me that every day?"

"Seriously? Don't lie to us. You actually have one, right !?"

They had just been chattering about the rumor of this Momo girl fooling around, but it seemed like they were hesitant to continue that topic when the person in

question was around. In a teasing manner, the **Gyaru** started asking this 『Momo girl questions that had little to do with the said rumor.

At that point, I became very curious. About the face of this 『Momo girl, who had five-timed and even prostituted herself.

When I was in middle school, I had always thought that, while the loose girls who fool around blatantly looked rather glitzy, their faces weren't anywhere near as cute on closer look; with such thoughts stemming from a point of view that even I couldn't comprehend myself, I casually turned my face to the right.

On looking, I was surprised.

Among the three **Gyaru**s, one of them was an incredibly beautiful Bishoujo. Two of them were seated while one of them was standing as they conversed, but that standing girl was the only one who was unnaturally cute. Judging from the conversation, that standing Bishoujo was no doubt the girl called 『Momo.

She had dyed brown, curled hair, wore a short skirt, and had on a red plaid ribbon instead of the tie

stipulated by the school..... she really is a **Gyaru** to the bone; she's more petite than a top magazine model, like the center of AKB; anyhow, she's really cute.

It was amazing that I hadn't noticed a girl like her after being in the same class for two weeks.

Now that I think about it, I just realized that, other than Hasegawa, I hadn't even glanced at the other girls.

Worried that I would be noticed if I stared too much, I hurriedly turned my face back to the front. Immersed for a while in the lingering cuteness of that strikingly beautiful **Bishoujo Gyaru** whom I'd just looked at, I then remembered a certain truth.

Oh right, that girl's a **Bitch**[11]. No matter how cute she is, I dislike **Bitches**. As a matter of fact, I really hate **Bitches**.

Besides, even though I only took a glance at her, probably at no more than 150 cm, she seemed pretty short and petite, and her face belonged to the **loli**-type. She was a **Gyaru**. The type I like has black straight hair

and is the pristine-type of girl, tall in height, with a calm, adult, beautiful look. In other words, it's Hasegawa Midori. The complete opposite of that **Gyaru**.

After straightening out my thoughts that Hasegawa was the only one for me, I stopped getting bothered by the conversation to my right and went back to reading my mystery novel. This time round, I managed to focus smoothly on my reading.

At the end of the period, Kiritani woke up at the sound of the bell. Out of curiosity, I asked Kiritani about that **Gyaru**.

"Aah, Koigasaki? She's really cute, isn't she? Though rumor says that she's slutting herself."

The same information which I heard earlier came out of Kiritani's mouth.

The only new piece of information I gleaned was that the family name of that Momo girl was 『Koigasaki.

"What's with you? Are you switching targets to Koigasaki because you couldn't make Hasegawa your

girlfriend? She's really cold to guys of her age, so I think it's best for you to just give it up. Besides, she's really popular."

"Cold towards guys? I thought she's a Bi..... slut?"

"The rumor is that she's only interested in older people and has no interest in guys her age. The proof is, when the guys in our class tried to talk to her, she was so cold that she didn't even respond. Though she's really sociable with the girls."

"Seriously....."

To be cold towards people whom she doesn't have an interest in, how self-centered can she be?

I gradually became more and more inclined to avoid contact with her.

After the end-day homeroom period, Kiritani wanted to go visit the clubs, so we parted ways and I headed to the shoe cupboard area, planning to go home. I never thought about joining any club in high school.

I felt like reading that mystery novel and resume from where I stopped earlier, and took it out from my bag, to read it as I walk.

At that moment, I bumped full force into a girl who suddenly appeared from around the corner.

The girl fell on her backside, and dropped the paper bag that she was holding onto the floor. The contents of the paper bag fell out, and stuff like manga and magazines lay scattered all over the corridor. I was carrying a backpack, so it was fine for me, but the book I was holding dropped on the floor.

"S-Sorry."

I apologized as I thought I was also at fault for not paying attention.

Then, I became dumbfounded as I looked at the girl before me.

It was the **Bishoujo Gyaru**, Koigasaki, whose existence I'd only recently become aware of.

The strong fragrance probably came from the perfume she was wearing.

Koigasaki looked at me and remained in a daze for a while. She seemed like she was surprised by something, but I had no idea what could have surprised her so. She appeared as she wanted to say something, but, without uttering a word, she quickly gathered her manga and magazines into her pink paper bag that had a branded logo on it. I was still spacing out when she finished gathering her stuff, stood up and left.

"That feels like shit."

I murmured without thinking after she left, in a barely audible voice.

I already apologized first, so she should at least say something. Which reminds me, it did seem like I was told she had no interest in guys her age and was thus downright cold to them.

With indignation, I picked up my novel from the floor and shoved it into my bag. I no longer had the mood to continue reading, so I made my way home while listening to the music on my iPod.

Before I knew it, I'd reached home.

I threw myself on the bed in my room, took out the mystery novel from my bag, opened it to continue reading it, and an incredible world unfolded before me.

"Even though I only just met him, I ended up coming to Tomonari's house... I looked at Tomonari in spite of my bashfulness and, 'Come over here', he said... ehh... you're kidding me! Even though we just met today, Tomonari flashed me the same smile he showed me at the club as he sat on the bed ... but, there's no way I can go over! (blush)."

"....."

I closed the book involuntarily.

The text that I had seen so far.

The generous spacing between the lines.

Those text symbols and emoticons scattered all over the place.

"What the hell is this!?"

I hurriedly took off the book jacket, and on the pink binding of the book I saw, written in large letters, what appeared to be the title, 『To My Beloved. The paper wrapper was still properly affixed, and written on it were the spurring words, A Heartrending Love, written by a current female high school student author.

Even though this was the first time I had looked at the actual contents, this was what was called a cellphone novel. Since it was the same size and had the same jacket as the novel I was reading, I didn't realize it until I saw the contents inside.

I thought back calmly. I could only think of one instance where I could have swapped my novel for this cellphone novel.

Which was the time when I bumped into Koigasaki. This novel was probably among the manga and magazines that fell out after we bumped into each other.

I bought the novel at a bookstore near our high school. I got the book jacket at that time too. And the book jacket that this cellphone novel was using was also from that

store. As many of our students visited that bookstore, it wasn't that surprising if Koigasaki had bought her novel and book jacket from that same store.

And since they both had the same jacket, Koigasaki had picked up the wrong book and put it in her paper bag.

"Uwah, seriously ~....."

While murmuring to myself, I flipped through the cellphone novel.

What I was reading earlier was the scene where the female high school student protagonist had gone back with the host she'd just met and fallen in love with at first sight. In the next scene, they did it. It was a development which filled me with disgust on top of the zingers I wanted to make.

"Is there anyone who could read this earnestly..... hahaha....."

Koigasaki won't think that I'm mocking her while reading this, right? Maybe it's better to pretend that I never read it when I return this..... while thinking that, I closed the cellphone novel, and this time, fished my bag

for the light novel that I wanted to read. I took it out and opened it.

In the next distant, my pupils became dots.

The book which I opened and thought to be my light novel wasn't a light novel at all. It was the mystery novel that had the same book jacket. It was the very book I had read in class today, and had thought to have dropped in the corridor and swapped with Koigasaki's cellphone novel.

Why was this novel in my bag?

At that moment, an unthinkable truth dawned on me.

"Craaaaaappppp!!"

The fact that this novel is with me now would mean that the novel I dropped in the corridor and that Koigasaki brought back by mistake, thinking it was her cellphone novel, was not the mystery novel, but the light novel with the same book jacket. Since they both have the same appearance, I had mistakenly taken the light novel out of the bag instead of the mystery novel.

Just like how I accidentally read the cellphone novel, Koigasaki might have read my light novel too.

Crap. This is bad.

Besides the fact that the light novel would let my **Otaku** secret out, to make things worse, the light novel that I bought yesterday was - shall I call it a romcom or an erocom? - a harem story where the protagonist suddenly gains four elder stepsisters who make erotic advances on him.

While harem erotic comedies are not uncommon among light novels, a normal person reading that would be freaked out.

Even if there were a chance in a million that Koigasaki had no interest in the text that was inside it, the cover and the illustrations alone were erotic enough. Just by flipping through it would be enough to know that it was some indecent **Otaku** stuff.

In other words, there was no doubt that she already knew my **Otaku** secret.

And to think that I had taken the trouble to become a closet **Otaku**, of all people, the one who found out was that superficial girl who looked like someone who'd hate **Otakus**.

If I were to leave it like that, it would only be a matter of time before that girl goes around telling everybody. My middle school history would then repeat itself again.

"Uwoaaaaahhh!!"

I let out a yell to unleash my pent up indignation.

"Shut up, idiot Naokiiiiiiiii."

The door to my room suddenly swung open and a girl with a ponytail, dressed in sailor uniform, threw her rage at me.

"Uwahh, Akari. You're home?"

It was my little sister.

"I'm at a really good scene in my game, so don't you disturb me with your shitty voice, jeez!"

What she was proudly holding out appeared to be a PC game. The box artwork was made up of two men with awfully long chins and sparkling eyes.

"Don't tell me that's....."

"A BL game[12] "

That innocent smile could have been on the smiling face of a pure, cute, uncorrupted girl.

If it wasn't for the goods that she held in her hands.

My little sister, who was in her freshman year of middle school, was a Fujoshi[13]. Both siblings in my house were **Otakus**.

"If you start ranting and disturbing me again, I will seriously kill you next time!"

With that, she slammed the door shut. Wait a minute, at least let me verify that the game is all-ages. I'm not going to let a middle school girl like you play a '18+ only' game, I wanted to say, but there was no chance for me to do that.

That night, I couldn't sleep due to the anxiety within me. I kept imagining the fearful worst..... where Koigasaki had already let my **Otaku** secret out to the rest of my classmates and they were looking at me with discriminating eyes.

In order to protect my peaceful school life, I definitely won't let that happen. And more than anyone else, I can't let Hasegawa know that I'm an **Otaku**.

Tomorrow when I return the book, I have to make sure that Koigasaki doesn't go shooting her mouth about my secret. I swore to myself with determination.

The next day, I was thinking of calling out to Koigasaki, but I found a piece of paper slipped under my desk.

"DuRiNg LUnch bREaK, cOmE TO tHe BaCk Of tHE GyM. I hAvE soMEthInG tO teLl YoU. KOIGASAKI."

Were the words written on the piece of paper, with the characteristic mixed cases of **Gyaru**s.

I first thought it was about the book, but it didn't quite add up. If she wanted to just return my book, she needn't take the trouble to arrange a meeting.

But it sure helped that she had set us up with an opportunity to talk. Even if she hadn't, I would still have to call her out to talk alone anyway.

Judging from her appearance, she looked like one with a bad personality, and I had no idea whether she would be willing to cooperate and help me keep my **Otaku** secret even if I asked her. But, in the worst case, I would even pay her money just to keep her mouth shut. That was how far I was willing to go.

While assaulted by the feeling of fear, I got through the morning classes, and went to the back of the gym without even taking my lunch.

I descended the stairs to the ground floor, left the school building, crossed the courtyard and arrived at the back of the gym, and Koigasaki was already waiting there. She had her back leaning against the wall and was playing with her cellphone. There was no doubt that she had a well-featured face at a closer look, but she wore

really thick make-up. Her other hand held my light novel .

"....."

By the way, even though Koigasaki was the one who called me out, she never opened her mouth. Even though she had already realized that I was here, she never even took a look at me. What the hell? Is it because you feel so creeped out by an **Otaku** who reads that kind of light novel that you don't even want to talk to me? Then why the hell did you call me out?

"..... erm, you want to talk about this book, right?"

Unable to bear the silence, I spoke up.

While saying that, I held out Koigasaki's cellphone novel, and she swiftly and roughly snatched it from my hand. Without saying a word.

I was getting mad. There should be a limit to how discourteous she could be.

"E-erhhmm, did you see what's inside my book?"

However, the timid me couldn't even voice my displeasure, and it was all I could do to ask her in a timid voice.

But Koigasaki did not answer and still would not make any kind of eye contact with me.

"If you saw what's inside..... I hope you can keep it to yourself."

"What is this?"

Koigasaki cut me off and opened her mouth for the first time. I felt peeved at her sudden outburst but still took a look at what Koigasaki help out in her hand. It was a card. It was the card that I had used in place of a bookmark. It was a trading card from the DS game, LoveMinus[14]. The illustration on the card was a character I liked, 『Anesaki Nono.

"E-eehhh.....? Well....."

I broke into a small panic. She finally spoke, but it was something incomprehensible. Why did Koigasaki express interest in the trading card of LoveMinus?

"It's a game card....."

"What game?"

"Er-rmm, a game called LoveMinus....."

"What kind of game?"

"Eeh? It's a dating simulation game....."

I cringed and finally answered her question. I really didn't want to answer, but in the face of Koigasaki's overbearing questioning method, I couldn't not answer.

"Dating simulation..... what's that?"

"Uhm, it's like, building relationships with girls....."

"Just as I thought....."

For some reason, Koigasaki's shoulders slumped in disappointment at my words.

"Errhh..... why are you asking that?"

This time, it was my turn to ask.

"..... do you know Suzuki-kun from class B?"

But, she asked me back another question.

"Suzuki.....? No, I don't....."

"Suzuki-kun also has a card like yours!"

Koigasaki suddenly became energetic and said in a manner that seemed like she couldn't quite accept what she said.

"Suzuki-kun dropped his student handbook and I saw him pick it up, and a card like this one was really carefully slotted inside it! ..... but on closer look, while they look similar, they aren't identical..... Even though the drawing and the design look really similar, they are not really the same. The one here has a girl brown hair, down-turned eyes and humongous breasts, but the one that Suzuki-kun had..... was the drawing of a girl with short black hair and small breasts."

While I felt that it was really regrettable that the Nono-san I loved so much was described as having humongous breasts, there were other matters that I was more concerned about.

"Short black hair with small breasts..... isn't that Rinka from LoveMinus?"

"Rinka? Then, does it mean that Suzuki-kun loves that Rinka character from that game? ..... then, he's an **Otaku** ?"

"Well, I'd believe so, since he has it carefully slotted in his student handbook....."

Koigasaki's face contorted in sadness.

It was understandable. Koigasaki liked that guy called Suzuki and took the trouble to call me out to ask about him, but after learning that he was in fact an **Otaku**, she received a shock.

"I can't believe it, to think that Suzuki-kun is an **Otaku**. ....."

Koigsaki murmured, with a look that said she was unable to accept it.

"Well, I think it's better to ask the actual person himself ....."

If she could take the trouble to call me out to ask me, she should have just asked the person in question.

It was rumored that Koigasaki was pretty intensely involved with guys. Then, it should be easy for her to just go talk to the guy she liked.

"Hey, won't you go ask Suzuki-kun for me? You play the same game so it should be easy to approach him as a fellow gamer, right?"

"..... huh?"

I doubted my ears on hearing Koigasaki's request. Why should I go talk to a stranger for the sake of a classmate **Gyaru** whom I was barely acquainted with? Besides, to ask a shy person like me to approach a stranger, the difficulty level was simply too high.

"You can just go talk to him yourself, right....."

"It's because I can't do it, that's why I'm asking you!"

Said Koigasaki, who appeared to be irritated, or anxious perhaps. Why did she snap at me when I should be the one to do that?

"Well, I can't do it either..... And, I want to quickly go eat my lunch, so can I go back already?"

Normally, I would be a timid guy who can't speak so assertively to a person he's first talked to, but her attitude was so bad that my mind just snapped.

I turned my back towards Koigasaki, about to head back to the classroom. At that moment.

"..... 『Big Sis Syndrome....."

"Eh....."

I heard Koigasaki's mutters from behind. Those words stopped me in my tracks.

That was the title of the big sis harem light novel which she had yet to return to me.

"Cohabiting with elder stepsisters? Entering the bath with elder stepsisters? And k-k-k-ki....."

Before she could finish the word 'kiss', I raised my voice.

"Hey, you read my book without asking!? How could you....."

..... well, I also read Koigasaki's outrageous cellphone novel without asking, so I shouldn't be talking about others.

"I don't believe this! Do all **Otakus** fantasize about such things!? It's really creepy and unbelievable!"

Koigasaki was red in the face, and was angry for some reason.

However, that reaction was somewhat different from my expectations.

Of course, I was expecting that she would be reacting in disgust to the light novel, but the kind of disgust she had was different from how I thought it would be.

The kind that I was expecting was a despising, belittling, exasperated kind.

That was the kind of reaction I imagined coming from the **Bitch Sweet(LOL) Gyaru** Koigasaki if she had seen the contents of the book.

If we are talking about the kind of line she would say, it would be something like.....

"It's amazing how a virgin thinks, huh ~ It's better to quickly get a real girlfriend, you know ~ ? (snigger)"

But, the girl before me.

"You are the worst! Really gross! Dirty! Pervert! And with such a harmless looking face!"

She threw the light novel at me with apparent indignation.

"Hey, what are you doing!"

While frantically catching hold of the flying book, I could only wonder in amazement.

Her flushed face, while partially due to anger as well... ... seemed to be one of embarrassment.

This reaction was as if it was coming from an innocent girl who had just been shown ecchi stuff.....

"Didn't you just ask me to keep quiet about the contents of the book? If you don't go and verify for me whether Suzuki-kun is an **Otaku** or not, then I will tell all the girls in class about..... what's in the book!"

"What.....!?"

I was speechless at her sudden shocking words.

It was a well-executed threat.

Does that mean that Hasegawa will also get wind of it?

"H-How can you....."

I couldn't stop shaking.

"I'm being serious here."

Koigasaki looked away and said brusquely. She looked determined.

"P-Please don't do that....."

"Then, you will do it?"

If my secret were to be discovered here, then my middle school history would repeat itself. All the efforts I had put in up till then in becoming a closet **Otaku** would go down the drain.

"Kuh..... I g-get it....."

I replied as I suppressed my chagrin. I no longer had any choice but to accept her request.

"Seriously!? You are a pretty good guy!"

A pretty good guy? What a thing to say when you've threatened me. Anyone else who had been threatened with that would accept it.

"In exchange, after I do that, you will keep mum about it....."

It was all I could do to emphasize that last part.

"Of course!"

Koigasaki answered with a smile of satisfaction.

"Well then, thanks in advance, erm..... what's your name again?"

"Kashiwada! Don't you remember your own classmate's name!"

It was a heinous thing to be threatened by a person who couldn't even remember my name.

I had only barely entered high school, and not only was my **Otaku** secret found out by a horrible **Sweet (LOL) Gyaru**, she even threatened to tell it to the rest of

the girls in class..... Why was I so unlucky to have such a thing happen to me?

Chapter 4

On that same day, after school, I immediately headed to class B.

I'm the type of person who wants to quickly get things that are troublesome or unpleasant out of the way.

As I made my way to class B, I peered through the back entrance into the classroom.

However, since I came all the way here without asking Koigasaki about anything regarding this person known as Suzuki, I had no idea who Suzuki was. And I had no choice but to ask someone randomly.

Just as I was peering into the classroom wanting to call out to someone, a male student who was on his way out called out to me,

"Are you looking for someone?"

I was surprised when I saw him. Standing before me was a guy with brown hair who was taller than me, and together with his bag, he appeared to be carrying

something resembling a guitar over his shoulder. He was directing a friendly smile towards me. He was not only good-looking, but also a kind fellow.

"Er no, it's ok."

I answered instantly as I panicked. My body felt like it wanted to run away from this great disparity. *He went out of his way to call out to me and what the hell do I do*, I felt disgusted with myself.

As the good-looking guy left the classroom, a glitzy female student followed after him and said,

"Sou-chan ~ where're you going?"

"Eh? The music room."

Such a conversation unfolded between them.

Good-looking, stylish, able to play the guitar, popular with girls..... in other words, **Riajuu** level maxed. Is it ok for such a guy to exist?

While feeling a little down from that, I remembered my mission and once again looked into the classroom. As I did that, I saw a male student, similarly plain as me,

sitting at the seat closest to the entrance. Since I had no one else to ask,

"Excuse me, erm, is there a Suzuki-kun in this class?"

"If you are talking about Suzuki, he just left the classroom though."

Just left the classroom..... don't tell me.

"The one with the brown hair and a guitar over his shoulders....."

"That's right."

That was unbelievable. The good-looking **Riajuu** earlier was the **Otaku** who had Rinka's card in his student handbook.....? Is that really ok?

If you had told me the plain-looking male student before me who had the same air as me were Suzuki-kun, I could accept it without question.

But then, come to think of it, Suzuki was the guy that Koigasaki had fallen for. If I took that into consideration, it wouldn't be strange that he was a good-looking guy.

I thanked the male student and left the classroom of class B.

While pondering, I headed towards the music room, since I recalled Suzuki had mentioned that as his destination. But even if I went to the music room, Suzuki might be engaged in his light music club activities, and it might be difficult for me to call out to him. If there was a chance in million that he wasn't, and that he was with another glitzy girl like the one earlier, then there was no way I could call out to him. If that were to happen, then I would have to give up on talking to him for today.

When I reached the music room, my thoughts came to a halt.

The sounds of a playing guitar drifted out from inside, and my jaw dropped at hearing the melody of a song that was extremely familiar to me.

"It's the ending theme of 'K-ON![15] club!!'....."

I unconsciously murmured out.

The sounds that flowed out which I was hearing now belonged to the ending theme of a popular anime which was centered around a light music club and which had just finished airing last year.

"You hear that? That guitar sounds really good, doesn't it?"

Before I knew it, there were a couple of female students who happened to pass by the music room and were all ears to the music.

Well, the guitarist is indeed good. But, before that, aren't you girls going to make a retort first? This is an **Ani-song**[16], right?

"Seems like Suzuki-kun from class B is playing it."

"Seriously? That hot guy?"

The girls left while squealing out excitedly. It appeared that they had no idea what they'd just heard was an **Ani-song**. That was understandable, since there was no way they could have known that if they didn't recognize the song.

And the one who played it was indeed that very Suzuki..... Everything fell into place. Suzuki was indeed an **Otaku**, and liked "LoveMinus" and "K-ON Club!!". ..... jeez, seems like we have some things in common. I was also into "K-ON Club!!" and had never missed a single week of the show.

After looking around and ascertaining that no one else was nearby, I made up my mind and opened the door to the music room. I thought I was pretty courageous myself. What if Suzuki is with other students? What if he gets mad at me entering without permission? I had of course thought of those things, but I did it because I truly wanted to try talking to Suzuki.

Fortunately, on entering the music room, I saw Suzuki by himself. Suzuki had his guitar plugged into the amplifier and was playing at a pretty loud volume, but, surprised by my sudden entrance, he stopped.

He stared at me.

"Ah, I-I'm sorry for suddenly barging in."

A sense of regret welled up in me. Now, looking at Suzuki once again, I could see that he was really a good-looking, stylish guy..... and didn't look like an **Otaku** at all.

Since it wasn't good to stay silent after suddenly barging in, I started frantically,

"Well, erm, I was walking along the corridor and suddenly heard the ED of 'K-ON Club!!', became delighted and opened the door without thinking..... because I, too, like this song of 'K-ON Club!!'....."

I talked rapidly.

Suzuki unplugged his guitar from the amplifier, unshouldered it and placed it on a chair, then turned towards me. From his expression, it seemed like he was being cautious with me.

Crap, why did I just barge in like that? He might say things like, *you dare disturb my performance, huh*. Come to think of it, the atmosphere felt as if he was going to say just that. On careful thought, my earlier actions were rather crazy.

"... you like 'K-ON Club!!'?"

But Suzuki's question threw me off instead.

"Eh? Y-yeah."

The instant I replied that.

My right hand was strongly clasped by the right hand of Suzuki. To put it in another way, he shook my hand.

"Seriously ~! Thanks for calling out to me ~!"

Suzuki's earlier cautious face broke into a smile. His smiling face had an air of innocence to it.

" I've been playing **Ani-songs** as a hobby every day after school and was kind of hoping for some **Otaku** to react to it ~"

"Eh, is that so? You aren't doing any light music club activities....."

"Well, that too, but I'm the only club member who comes for club activities."

"I see..... erm, you play **Ani-songs** every day, you say. What else can you play?"

"Aah, I can play all the songs from 'K-ON Club!!', as well as other famous **Ani-songs** and **Vocaloids**[17]. I've been practicing only **Ani-songs** ever since I got hooked on 'K-ON Club!!' during middle school and that was when I picked up the guitar."

"Really!? Awesome ~!"

"I also submitted my entries to the 'Try playing **Ani-songs** on guitar' section of **Nico Nico Douga**[18]."

"Eeh! Seriously!? What name did you submit them as?"

I had totally forgotten Koigasaki had blackmailed me to come talk to Suzuki, and became engrossed in our conversation. The reason was because, since coming to this high school, I had been living my life as a closet **Otaku** and could never have an **Otaku** conversation. Even though it was my resolve to do that, I felt extremely sad when I couldn't talk about the things I loved. I was truly happy to be able to talk about such stuff after such a long time. Besides, the fact that this was my first **Otaku**

friend since coming to high school made me even happier.

After that, Suzuki played the **Ani-songs** I requested; we talked about **Otaku** stuff animatedly; linked up our portable game consoles to play games like LoveMinus and Freak Hunter[19], and while doing all that, time flew and it was time for the school to be closed for the day.

"I'm so happy ~, this is the first time I've made an **Otaku** friend outside of the Internet."

Suzuki said with genuine joy from his heart.

"Eh, is that so?"

"Yeah, there are also **Otakus** in my class, you know. But, when I tried to talk to those who read manga and light novels and engage in such **Otaku** discussion..... asking them, *hey what are you reading?*, they would say, *nothing!*, hide their stuff and escape from me..... Isn't that awful? It's ostracism, totally ostracism."

Suzuki sighed sadly. This might be rude to Suzuki, but I could also totally understand the feelings of those **Otaku** classmates of his. With the **Riajuu** aura that

seemed to be radiating from his entire body, it was quite difficult to imagine that he was an **Otaku**. They probably thought he was there to mock them and escaped out of fear.

Following that, we left and walked to the station together, exchanged our contact info and parted ways. Even though I was pleased to have made my first **Otaku** friend, as I thought about the report that I needed to make to Koigasaki, I headed home with complicated feelings.

The next day, this time round, it was me who left a note under Koigasaki's desk.

"After school, I have a report to make so come to the stairs just before the classroom. Kashiwada."

The school day ended, and I headed to the stairs which I had specified. Koigasaki was already there, adopting a daunting pose with arms folded as she waited for me.

"Did you ask Suzuki-kun? How was it?"

Immediately after I arrived at the appointed place, Koigasaki started asking me impatiently.

"Yeah, Suzuki is an **Otaku**. And a hardcore one."

After hearing my words, Koigasaki said,

"Seriously..... he really is one....."

With a look that clearly said that she was disappointed .

Well, her reaction was understandable. I knew that to girls, a guy being an **Otaku** was really a big minus point. That was why I had decided to become a closet **Otaku**.

Especially for a **Sweet(LOL) Gyaru** like Koigasaki who was prejudiced against **Otakus**, even if the other party were a good-looking guy, once she knew that he was an **Otaku**, she would probably lose interest in him.

"Oh? Kasshii?"

At that moment, which could only be called just the right moment, Suzuki passed by. With a bag over his shoulder, he was probably on his way home. By the way, *Kasshii* was the nickname that Suzuki gave me yesterday.

"What good timing! I was looking for you and couldn't find you in your classroom. I was thinking of going to Akiba on my way back. You wanna join me?"

"Eh, Akiba!? Sure, sure!"

I'd been thinking of going to Akiba lately, so I acknowledged twice and agreed. However, after saying that, I quickly looked around me. To think that a closet **Otaku** like me had declared something so **Otaku**-ish at a place in school where an indefinite number of people might pass. After seeing that no one other than us was around, I breathed a sigh of relief. Then, after remembering the existence of a certain person, I turned to look at Koigasaki.

She was clearly blushing as she gazed at Suzuki without blinking an eyelid. She was completely taken in by him. Even though she should already be used to men, she could still have such an innocent maiden look towards her unrequited love.

"Seriously? All right! It's been my dream to go to Akiba with an **Otaku** friend!"

Suzuki smiled with child-like innocence.

"And you know, today's the launch day of Rinka's figurine! Even though I've already pre-ordered it and there's no need to hurry, it's really best to get it on the first day right away, right!? Oh yeah, Kasshii, the figurine of the Nono-san you like hasn't come out yet, right? When will it be launched? Are you buying it?"

As Suzuki rambled non-stop about **Otaku** stuff, I couldn't hide my discomfort. If it were like yesterday inside the music room, which acted like a secret room for me, then it would be of no consequence, but in this corridor where there was a possibility of people passing by, the one and only person who was weighed down by the atmosphere caused me to waver. As I took a glance at that one and only person, perhaps due to the shock of the person she liked rambling on and on about **Otaku** stuff before her, she stared at Suzuki with her eyebrows stiffened up in a contorted manner.

"Ah, sorry, are you in the middle of a conversation?"

At last, Suzuki was conscious of Koigasaki's existence.

As Koigasaki said nothing,

"No, it's fine! We are done here. See you, Koigasaki-san , I'll take my leave here....."

I said to the stiffened up Koigasaki, and leaving her there, I took Suzuki with me and left the place. She had just asked me to verify whether Suzuki was an **Otaku** or not, and I had already more than fulfilled her request. If we kept on engaging in our **Otaku** talk in front of her, even she would probably be unable to take the blow of that truth in her face. After experiencing that, she would probably lose interest in Suzuki, I thought. Frankly speaking, that would do me a favor as well. I really didn't want my friend, Suzuki, to be the prey of the bad personality of a **Sweet Bitch**.

That day, I went to Akihabara with Suzuki, picked up the figurine that Suzuki pre-ordered, and with that, toured around the shop looking at the figurines there. Following that, we went to a **Doujin** shop, and finally went to Suzuki's favorite maid cafe, and chatted enthusiastically. Since Suzuki frequented Akiba more often than me, he knew the place well. After not visiting Akiba in ages, I was able to come with an **Otaku** friend, and with a happy mood, my day came to an end.

The next day, even when I thought I would never talk to her again, Koigasaki called out to me.

"Do you have a minute?"

I was surprised, but Kiritani who was with me was just as surprised. It was understandable, since for a flashy **Gyaru** who stood out the most in class to call out to a plain guy like me, there had to be an unusual reason behind it.

Koigasaki and I left the classroom and moved to the staircase where we had our talk yesterday.

"I mean, this really pisses me off! Why is someone like you able to have such a fun talk with Suzuki-kun and even go hang out together after that!?"

"..... huh?"

I finally made an idiotic sound at Koigasaki's first words.

Quite certainly, Koigasaki was jealous about me being with Suzuki yesterday.

"Are you still in love with Suzuki!? You should know very well that Suzuki is a hardcore **Otaku**, right!? But yet , why....."

"Huh? It doesn't really matter to me whether Suzuki is an **Otaku** or not. Rather, I'm attracted to a person who has many hobbies ~!"

"What!? Didn't you keep dissing me about how creepy I am as an **Otaku**!?"

"Suzuki is in a completely different dimension from you, so that's natural, right!"

While I didn't really get what she meant by being in a different dimension, I was clearly pissed off with that.

"I'm really envious! Suzuki showed you that kind of smile..... Even though it had been such a long time since I talked to Suzuki yesterday! But oh well, I was still happy with that ~"

"Talk.....? Did you guys talk yesterday?"

"'Ah, sorry, are you in the middle of a conversation?', he said to me!"

Koigasaki said enthusiastically, her overflowing happiness evident on her face.

"No, about that..... Koigasaki, you didn't reply back anything, right..... Rather, in the first place, wasn't that directed towards me.....?"

"Huh!? That was totally said to me! Even though I wasn't able to say anything because I was in seventh heaven, he was really kind to be considerate of me ~!"

Seemingly not feeling like a speck of dust even though she had been treated as virtually non-existent, she was practically floating. How much of a fix did she need up there?

"So, I've thought about it. In order to be able to have that kind of fun chat with Suzuki-kun and hang out with him after school, it's best for me to also become an **Otaku** !"

"..... huh?"

I was puzzled by her sudden shocking conclusion which didn't make the slightest sense to me.

"Because what you have that I don't is just 『**Otaku** knowledge』 right! That's why I've decided. I shall become an **Otaku**! So, I'll become an **Otaku** and become friendly with Suzuki-kun!"

"Eh, what are you saying? What are you saying? What are you saying?"

I was confused, unable to understand Koigasaki's declaration.

"It's just as I've said! Anyhow, I think I shall start with that Love-something game that Suzuki-kun likes. Where can I buy that game?"

"..... huh?"

Don't kid me. How did she arrive at such a conclusion ? I'd like to take a peek into this fellow's brain.

Even if heaven and earth switched places, such a **Sweet(ry)**[20] couldn't possibly become an **Otaku**, I bet. To put it badly, it was perhaps even more difficult than me becoming a **Riajuu**.

"Do you think you can become an **Otaku** with such twisted feelings!? In the first place, you can't become an **Otaku** just because you want to become one! It's a process where you become one before you know it....."

"Ah- jeez- you are annoying, whatever, just tell me where I can get it."

"Where, you say..... well, normally you should be able to get it at Yodobashi or any electronic shop, though....."

"Fuhn. What do you use to play that game? Playstation ?"

"No, DS....."

"DS ~!? I used to have one, but since I didn't play much, I gave it away..... It'll be a waste to buy it again."

I wouldn't be able to do a thing about that even if you tell me. What if she wants to borrow it from me? I play DS games often, so I definitely wouldn't want to lend it.

"If I were to buy it again for the sake of that game....."

Koigasaki murmured incessantly with a deep troubled look on her face. Well, you can just give up on playing LoveMinus.

"Hey, did Suzuki-kun mention that he is hooked on something else as well? Besides Love-something."

"Eh?"

"You talked a bunch with Suzuki-kun, so you should know, right!?"

"Ah-..... erm, seems like he's most hooked on a game called 『Forever Over This Blue Sky[21].....".

『Forever Over This Blue Sky was an adult (18+) PC game. A little while ago, I also borrowed it from a friend and was hooked on it. Both the CG and music were wonderful, the scenarios were also interesting, and even on the net, it was dubbed a godly game. The only thing was, according to Suzuki, that it was a pity that the erotic scenes were awfully short. After hearing that kind of line, which was unexpected from one with Suzuki's appearance, I had to smile a little.

"What kind of game is that? Have you played it as well ?"

I was hesitant at Koigasaki's questions.

"A-ah, yeah..... Erm well, it's a game where you get along with girls....."

"Then isn't it the same as that Love-something?"

"No, it's similar but a little..... no, largely different....."

I couldn't really say something like, 'It's a 18+ game with erotic scenes'.

"Ah, you sure are beating about the bush! What on earth is it!!"

Just before Koigasaki went into a livid rage, I steeled my resolve, looked around me to make sure no one was around, and told her softly,

"It's an **Eroge**[22]..... meant for the PC."

"Huh? **Eroge**..... what's that?"

"Well erm, it has those kind of scenes....."

"..... those kind of scenes, what, don't tell me there are erotic scenes.....!?"

I nodded silently.

"Huuuuuuuuuuuhhhhhh!?"

Koigasaki's reaction was beyond my expectations.

"You, not just that strange novel, but you also play such games!? What a hardcore pervert! Really ewwww! I really can't believe this, this is so unbelievable!"

Koigasaki suddenly distanced herself one meter away from me, and showed a disgusted face.

"You were the one who asked, right!?"

If I knew she would react in this manner, I wouldn't have told her. I was awfully regretful.

"By the way, it's not just me, but Suzuki also plays that game. Now, you know that Suzuki is the same kind of **Otaku** as me, which you hate!?"

"It's not like I hate **Otakus** or anything. I only find it gross that you actually play such erotic games. Wait, you are gross."

"You are saying something really unreasonable!"

"Well, Suzuki-kun is a guy, right, so it's natural to play such games! Come to think of it, I think Suzuki-kun is seeking something other than erotic fulfillment!"

I wanted to tell her that that the person, Suzuki-kun himself, had commented about how insufficient the erotic scenes were. But I didn't really want to continue our talk about **Eroge** in such a public place.

"So, what's the name of that game?"

"..... eh?"

"If it's a PC game, I have one, so I can play it."

"..... huh!?"

I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

"Wh-what the hell are you saying..... just now you were pretty disgusted, right!? Impossible, definitely!"

"I was only disgusted with you playing such games. If I play that game, I'll be able to have fun talking to Suzuki-kun, right? When I think of that, it's a breeze! Hey, where can I buy that game?"

"Where, you say..... I won't say anything bad, but seriously, stop that!"

No matter what, I really wanted to stop Koigasaki from playing that game. Just from knowing about the erotic scenes, she was already so disgusted towards me, so I thought it was really impossible for her to play that game. Even my light novel had already made her so disgusted. If she played an **Eroge**, she would really be creeped out and would surely diss me like crazy.

"Hey, so tell me where I can buy it already!"

"Gweh!"

My necktie was suddenly yanked.

"Or what is it? You want others to know that you are an **Otaku**?"

"Wha! I get it! I'll talk! You can buy it at..... Animate or Gamers[23] in Akiba....."

"Even if you tell me the shop's name, I won't know. Bring me there."

"Huuuhhh!?"

Does that mean I will go to Akiba with Koigasaki alone?

"Ah, but those shops have a lot of **Otaku** guys, right? Maybe it's really impossible after all....."

"Ermm hey, if you hate **Otakus**, then you shouldn't be getting your hands on **Otaku** stuff in the first place!"

"Eh? No, it's not that....."

As Koigasaki wanted to say something.

"Hey hey ~, Koigasaki-chan."

"!"

As I turned towards the voice, I saw a gaudy brown-haired guy who wore his pants hanging from the hip.

If I wasn't mistaken, he was in my class..... a guy called Ashida.

"Every time I tried to talk to you, you ignored me, and yet, why are you talking with that lame guy ~?"

While saying that, he moved towards Koigasaki.

Lame guy..... he's talking about me?

Without saying a word to that guy, Koigasaki ignored him and walked towards the classroom with a quick pace .

"Hey, hey."

Without knowing the reason, I just followed behind Koigasaki for now.

"Wait a minute, are you ostracizing me? How cold can you be?"

Luckily, that guy merely lamented without following us.

By the time we got back to the classroom, there was no longer anyone there.

"Hey, Koigasaki....."

I looked at Koigasaki, wanting to ask about that guy.....

And I saw her with a surprisingly pale face.

"H-hey..... you don't look too good. Was that guy just now someone you really hate? Did he do something awful to you....."

"I don't know."

"Eh....."

Koigasaki said that nonchalantly.

"He tried to talk to me several times, but I have never spoken to him once. I don't even know his name."

"..... y-you're kidding, right? Then why do you look so pale?"

Koigasaki's reaction was not normal. Why did she behave like that towards someone whom she didn't have an ax to grind?

"I-It doesn't matter, right! It's none of your business. And, don't come so close to me!"

I was peering into her face, seriously a little worried, and Koigasaki displayed her displeasure and put a distance away from me. When seeing her indifference, I felt pretty hurt.

"Then, I'll take my leave here....."

If the two of us continued to stay like this in a classroom alone, it would just get worse. Unable to bear with it anymore, I shouldered my bag and prepared to leave the classroom.

In the instant I put my hand on the door.

"I..... can't deal well with guys."

"..... eh?"

The words that came out of Koigasaki's mouth were a little beyond my expectations.

"Can't deal well with guys.....?"

"From kindergarten all the way to middle school, I've only gone to all-girls schools, and I only have sisters in my family, so other than my father, I've never had a long conversation with any other guy....."

"..... huh!? W-Wait a minute!"

There were at least two contradictions that arose based on the information that I had.

"What?"

Koigasaki showed a sign of irritation as she interrupted.

"Then, what about the rumor that you were fooling around with guys....."

"Huh? Eh, even you know about that rumor.....!?"

"Eh, well, it was something I overheard in the classroom, though....."

So to speak, most of the class knew of it, probably.....

"There's a girl from class C by the name Honjou. I can't verify it, but the rumor was probably spread by her..... Besides, she's hated me since a long time ago..... Aaahh jeez! Even when I denied it, it still spread....."

Koigasaki looked down, biting her lip, mortified.

"S-so it's a false rumor, huh..... ah, but, I've also heard that you were walking with a salaryman....."

I took advantage of the opportunity to ask about everything unreservedly in order to further clear my doubts.

"Huh? Salaryman? What's that?"

Seeing her indignation, it seemed like it was something she could not remember.

"Maybe that's also spread by Honjou-san....."

"No, I think you were seen in Shibuya or something, I think it was something concrete....."

After pondering for a while, as if she remembered something, Koigasaki looked up,

"..... I often go shopping with my Dad at Shibuya, though....."

"..... I'm going to ask this just in case, that Dad is your real father....."

"Of course!? Who else!?"

..... in other words, she wasn't going out with men for money, it was just a normal shopping trip between father and daughter. What a ruckus-causing rumor.

Which meant the rumor that Koigasaki was fooling around with men was one hundred percent false.

Which left one more question.

"I see..... I understand now that you don't deal well with men. But, aren't you talking incessantly with me normally?"

Even though she said that she had never talked to men for long periods of time other than teachers and her father, I realized that she had been talking to me quite normally.

"Yeah, that's right..... I don't really get it either, but it's probably because I don't recognize you as a man."

I could not retort at all after hearing that sudden, merciless surprise attack that was greatly damaging.

"When I bumped into you for the first time, it was kind of unbelievable. If it were other men, I would have gotten goosebumps just from touching alone, but surprisingly, I had no reaction towards you..... Even when we were close, I didn't blush nor feel nervous at all. And besides, I was really curious about Suzuki-kun's card, so I took a chance to call you out. And there, I was thinking, what if I couldn't talk to you after that? But, it was all a needless worry. It was quite a different experience with other guys, but talking to you doesn't make my heart beat rapidly nor make my face red. It's probably because you are a lame guy, an **Otaku**, and your aura seemed weak, so I couldn't see you as a man and was able to talk to you normally, I suppose."

Koigasaki started nodding to herself, agreeing to the conclusion she seemed to have created from her own thoughts.

Lame guy, **Otaku**, and weak aura..... I no longer felt like rebutting all that.

"Anyhow, that's how it is with regards to that! So, won't you bring me to a shop that sells that game 『Forever Over This Blue Sky? Ah, it'll also be ok for me to hand you the money and for you to buy it for me. Actually, that will be a big help to me."

She changed back the subject, huh.

"Who would do such a thing!"

Hurting me with those words, and making me her errand boy, this woman really was a devil. After reaching this point, it sounded like I was in dire danger of setting the flag that would start my high school life of becoming her errand boy.

"I'm just asking you to bring me to the game shop. Do you really dislike it that much? And to think I'm asking you so earnestly!"

It's not like I dislike bringing there. It's just that I dislike lending a hand to such a self-centered, oppressive girl. I wanted to try saying that.

"..... I get it. If you are so against it, I won't ask you anymore."

Koigasaki murmured with a frightfully lowered voice.

"See ~ you! Perverted hardcore **Otaku**-kun!"

After saying that in an angry tone, Koigasaki picked up her bag and stood up from her seat.

The instant I heard her say that, my back froze.

That's right, this fella had caught hold of my weakness . I couldn't know when my **Otaku** secret would get leaked out.

"Jeez, I get it! I'll accompany you! I'll go!"

I steeled my resolve and struck my hands onto the table with a sound. I was already desperate.

"Ah, really? That'll be really helpful ~"

Said Koigasaki shamelessly with a devilish smile.

Koigasaki wanted us to go immediately right there and then, but I stopped her saying that there was no way we could buy an adult(18+) game in our school uniforms, so on Friday, which was tomorrow, the very first day of Golden Week, the two of us would meet at the Electric Town Exit of Akihabara station in our most adult-looking casual wear.

How did it come to this? Even though I just wanted to spend my high school days peacefully.

While I was feeling totally melancholic that day, I suddenly realized a truth.

A guy and a girl meeting up on a holiday..... this was a **Riajuu** situation that I'd always yearned for..... simply speaking, wasn't this a date?

..... no, wait, forget that. I would be damned if this could be called a date.

While it was of course my first time going out alone with a girl, I was merely accompanying Koigasaki. The other party probably hadn't the slightest such thought,

and it would be embarrassing if she found out that I had even considered it a little.

April 29, Friday, 12.45 pm.

While feeling embarrassed, I waited nervously in front of the gantry area of the Electric Town Exit of Akihabara station fifteen minutes before the appointed time.

Be it due to the other party being a **Gyaru** who was quite the opposite of the type I liked, be it because I was accompanying that **Gyaru** in shopping for her own stuff, getting to go out together with a female classmate alone... ... it was natural that I was nervous. By the way, the night before, I lied on my bed for three hours without falling asleep. How lame could I be?

After listening to the Vocaloid collection, which to me was godly, for ten minutes, just five minutes before the appointed time, Koigasaki appeared.

"Ah, aren't you early?"

As I looked at Koigasaki in her casual clothes after hearing that, I was lost for words.

She was wearing a leopard-print one-piece blouse, netting tights, a fluffy hat like a Russian, and high boots.

"You, that outfit....."

"Adult-like outfit, right? I borrowed everything from my big sister."

Adult-like, it's more like a flashy **Gyaru**. It totally didn't match Koigasaki's kiddy face. Her make-up was even thicker than what she wore in school, and her hair was even more curled than usual.

"Rather, what's with your outfit....."

I didn't have any brothers I could borrow clothes from, so I selected the most adult-like clothes that I had..... rather, they were plain ones.

"Lame..... like an old man....."

"What the hell! Like an old man, then it fits the criteria of adult-like, so it's ok!"

"..... well, that's true..... Where do you buy your clothes?"

"Eh..... either my parents buy them for me..... or I buy them when I go to Taiē or Yōkatō[24]....."

"..... I can't believe you....."

Koigasaki looked over my entire body as if I were a rare animal.

"You're annoying! Just leave me alone!"

Unable to bear with Koigasaki's gaze, my feelings somewhat hurt, I started walking.

After exiting the left side of the station, many people could be seen coming to and from the street of Akihabara . Most of them were guys.

"Gasp."

Koigasaki's earlier self-assuredness took a sudden change and her eyebrows knitted upon seeing the street of Akihabara.

"Let's see, the closest place that sells **Eroge** would be..... Gamers."

Upon coming out of the Electric Town exit, I immediately decided that we would go purchase a copy of 『Forever Over This Blue Sky at a Gamers. After seeing the state of Koigasaki, I concluded that it wasn't a good idea to walk around too much.

"Please come support us."

The staff from a maid cafe was distributing fliers to us, but it seemed like Koigasaki didn't have the leisure to even take it.

But it was still fine up till that point. Even though I was fearful, Koigasaki didn't really look that terrible.

At the instant we entered Gamers.

"Hey, there's a lot of people....."

The number of customers at Gamers during a holiday was huge. Of course, most of them were male customers. Koigasaki's words trailed off and her face turned pale.

"Hey, look at you. How would you be able to buy it?"

"Eh, t-this is nothing. Since my final goal is to become an **Otaku**, I have to bear with this."

Her determination was admirable, but I was worried whether she could really bear with it and carry that out.

"Uwah what's with the erotic pictures..... do they sell this normally? Wait, doesn't this shop carry a sweet fragrance? What's this? Air freshener?"

The interior of the shop was pasted with illustrations of girls whose panties were showing or were scantily-clad, and on seeing them, Koigasaki's disgust flowed out. And she started finding faults even with the smell of the shop.

I wanted to take the elevator to level six where **Eroge** were sold, but after seeing that the elevator was filled with male customers, "I will take the stairs.....", Koigasaki murmured. Take the stairs till level six, huh. Are you serious?

Left with no choice, I accompanied her, and the both of us climbed the stairs in silence. The male customers who were coming down and who passed by us threw glances

at Koigasaki. Flashy **Gyaru** fashion like hers that was seldom seen in Gamers completely stood out.

"We've arrived....."

Finally reaching the sixth floor, Koigasaki sighed out.

The customers on the sixth floor were comparatively less than that of the first floor.

"It's probably here....."

I brought Koigasaki to the corner where **Eroge** were sold.

Much harsher difficulties awaited Koigasaki there.

"Wh-what's this! What's with these pictures!"

Before us were adult(18+) games on display. Seeing those erotic illustrations which were a notch 'richer' than the illustrations of the light novel I was reading, Koigasaki said,

"Somehow..... I'm not feeling too well....."

After getting too much of a shock, her face turned pale and quivered.

"And to top it off, all the people on this floor..... are guys....."

"Wasn't it the same at level one?"

"No, besides me, there were still a few girls on the first floor..... Here..... I'm the only girl....."

Koigasaki was filled with despair as she looked around her.

"Didn't I warn you about this before? Well, it's bothersome, so I'll go buy it."

I thought it was definitely impossible for Koigasaki in her current state to bring a 'rich' **Eroge** from among the merchandise displayed to the cashier.

"..... no, I'll buy it! Since I've already come all the way here, I'll buy it with my own hands!"

Even though she looked as if she was going to puke, she still headed towards the **Eroge** corner display. What

amazing guts she had..... she was that much in love with Suzuki.....

I immediately found 『Forever Over This Blue Sky from the line of best-sellers in the **Eroge** corner, and I passed it to Koigasaki. Koigasaki drew back when she saw the packaging illustrations, but she steeled her resolve and carried it to the cashier. Looking at her back, she somehow seemed indomitable..... huh?

After exchanging a few words with the shop staff, Koigasaki came back in low spirits. With the game in her hands.

"I was told to show something that can verify my age... ..."

I could understand why, with Koigasaki's out-of-place fashion and her guileless face, it was simply hard to see her as someone who's eighteen or above.

"Well, that's a natural....."

"You liar! You said that I can buy the game by coming here, right!?"

To Koigasaki, coming all the way here and carrying the game to the cashier was probably a tough thing to do. After having her efforts come to naught in an instant, she complained to me with a half-teary face.

"Argh, I get it! Let's change the place! We should be able to buy it there....."

I decided to head to another place to buy the game. If it's the place where I normally buy my **Eroge**, age verification would not be needed.

"You should have brought me to that shop in the first place!"

"I thought you didn't want to walk too much, so I figured we should just get it at the Gamers nearest the station."

While arguing, we walked out of Gamers onto the main road. Seemingly afraid of the many men who were coming to and fro, Koigasaki kept quiet throughout.

"Hey, aren't we there yet?"

"About three more minutes."

We single-mindedly walked along the main road and reached our destination shop. From its appearance, it was evident that it was an **Eroge** specialist shop.

"Uwah....."

I could hear the soft murmur of Koigasaki. Compared to the Gamers earlier, there were even more illustrations of scantily dressed Bishoujos pasted both outside and inside the shop. On seeing them, as expected, Koigasaki's expression became even more contorted then before and her face didn't look too good.

"All right, I'll buy it, so pass me your purse."

"Eh..... ehh? Aah....."

I took the purse from the dumbfounded Koigasaki and entered the shop, intending to finish it off quickly. This time around, Koigasaki didn't act tough and go 'I'll buy it '. She probably understood that it was impossible for her to enter this ero-paradise-like shop.

I immediately found the targeted 『Forever Over This Blue Sky and brought it to the cashier. As usual, without being asked for any age verification, I easily bought it.

"Here."

I returned to the Koigasaki who looked like a lost kid outside the shop and passed her the **Eroge**.

"You're kidding! You managed to buy it this quickly!?"

"Because this shop doesn't require age verification."

Koigasaki took the plastic bag containing the **Eroge** happily, and put it inside the big bag she carried on her shoulder.

"When I was asked to verify my age, I thought that there was no way I'd be able to buy it ~"

After getting the game she wanted, she immediately went back to her old self and her mood improved. The color returned to her face as well. Thank goodness she was such a simple fellow.

Following that, we headed straight to the station.

"After this, I'm meeting my friends at Shinjuku at three . There's surprisingly quite a lot of time left ~"

On my side, I was super nervous about today's appointment, and yet, Koigasaki had two dates on the same day. As expected of a **Riajuu**. The appointment with me was, after all, probably just something additional.

"Well, I'll be taking the Yamanote line."

"Aah, see you."

I said goodbye readily, turned my back towards her and started walking towards the platform where my homebound train would arrive.

"Ah, Kashiwada."

I was suddenly stopped by her words.

Even though I felt that something was out of place, I turned around.

I see, all this while, she had been calling me **Otaku**, and this was the first time she had called me by my name , and that was what felt out of place.

"Thank you."

Said Koigasaki.

She said just that in a brusque manner and left.

It was such a sudden thing that I was swayed.

That devil-like girl, that self-centered Koigasaki, said her thanks. It seemed like she still had a bit of a human's heart left.

With complicated feelings, I took my home-bound train and went home.

Chapter 5

Aside from going shopping with Koigasaki (?), I spent the rest of Golden Week just surfing the net and playing games. After returning to school one week later, I remembered my reality.

I was like a mob forming part of the background in the corner of the classroom, while Koigasaki was a **Gyaru** surrounded by a group of girls.

Who would believe that just the two of us had met up at a place like Akiba? Even I myself couldn't believe it.

Once Koigasaki managed to get the game she wanted, my role was over. The skies had cleared and I was once again free.

I turned my eyes to Hasegawa at the front row. After not seeing her for a week, she was the same cool beauty as ever..... but, as usual, there wasn't a single person near her.

As always, I enthusiastically and diligently helped her out with the menial tasks. This had already turned into my daily routine.

That's right, I had once again returned to my peaceful days. Koigasaki didn't call out to me either. After all that help I gave her, she probably wouldn't do something like threatening to divulge my **Otaku** secret again, I supposed.

I could just continue to look at Hasegawa and help her out from the shadows each day.

Even though the day I would become a **Riajuu** was still far away, I could spend my days in peace and quiet. That alone would make me contented.

However, that thought was but a passing fantasy.

On that day, after returning a book to the library after school, I went back to class to retrieve my bag. And Koigasaki was at her seat, alone, touching up her make-up.

It would feel really awkward if I didn't say anything, so I put my mind to work, and finally, using something that I was really curious about as a topic, I started.

"Yoh, have you made any progress with the game?"

I wondered why. Even though I really wanted to talk to Hasegawa but never did, surprisingly, I was able to talk to Koigasaki effortlessly.

The game was of course referring to the one she bought at Akiba, 『Forever Over This Blue Sky. Even if Koigasaki said she was doing it for Suzuki, I just couldn't imagine her playing that game.....

"....."

As she kept silent, my heart was about to crumble at the thought of her ignoring me, but that was not actually the case.

"What the heck was that!!"

Koigasaki then shouted in a rather loud voice after putting down her makeup tools. She was just building herself up for a huge outburst.

"Eh, you really played it?"

"Of course, I did play it! I had to go shopping and visit the amusement park with friends, and go on a trip with my family! It was really a busy Golden Week for me, and I still took time in-between to secretly play it at night!"

"R-really? It must have been tough. How was it?"

I went on to prompt her as I received a damage combo upon hearing about her Golden Week that totally contrasted from mine, which was spent cooped up at home for the entire week.

"That game was really dumb! In the first place, how can a guy (the protagonist) with no redeeming qualities be popular with his childhood friend and the cute girls in class!? That's impossible! If it were me, I would definitely never fall for that kind of guy!"

"Your first complaint is about that huh..... Well, these are expected developments for such games....."

"And what's up with that childhood friend!? Her speech pattern is really out of this world! Every three lines, she will spout out a 'fuhnyaa~'. What's that!? What language is that!? If a girl like that exists in reality, people will surely avoid her like crazy!"

"Well, that's a character trait..... it's a game, after all..... "

To Koigasaki, the worst part should be the erotic scenes but before we even reached there, there seemed to be already plenty of areas that pissed her off. Ignoring my explanation, she continued shooting her retorts off like an unstoppable machine gun.

"There are others; like the girl who used masculine form to address herself, and the junior who's not even the protagonist's sister but still called the protagonist ' Onii-chan'! S'cuse me, I don't remember becoming your big brother, duh!? Aah, also! What's wrong with the clothes of those girls!? Game or not, they look lame! And I don't get their gravity-defying hair!"

Is this how a normal girl would react to playing an **Eroge**? I had just acquired a piece of knowledge which I could do without for the rest of my life.

"If those normal scenes already got you so worked up, then those erotic scenes would be much worse....."

"....! Well, those normal scenes were indeed still fine... ... but that scene that came later....."

The tone of Koigasaki's voice changed. I swallowed.

"The instant it started, I couldn't stand it and turned off my PC right away."

"What, hey! You didn't save!?"

There were so many places in her complaints that I wanted to retort to, but I took the safer choice.

"I did save somewhere before that. Aah~, but after seeing that, I don't feel like playing anymore!"

"That's why I tried to stop you."

I had expected her to give up on opening the package and in fact, that might have been preferable, but anyhow, just as expected, she surrendered before it had even really started. Well, it was understandable.

"Love Minus might have been easier for you~"

Since unlike **Eroge**, Love Minus is targeted towards all ages. I supposed Koigasaki should also find it easier to play. With that thought in mind, I ended up unintentionally speaking it out loud.

I regretted it immediately after opening my mouth. Saying that would definitely lead to.....

"Fuuhn..... Love-whatever is easier to play?"

"Eh, w-well....."

"But I don't have a DS console..... oh my."

Crap. She noticed.

"You have one, right? Lend it to me."

Here it comes!

"Don't joke with me! I'm a heavy user of DS, to the point of carrying it with me every day, you know!? Are you going to steal it from me!?"

I vehemently resisted.

"That's right, since you want to become an **Otaku** so much, how about watching an anime instead of playing games!? Unlike games, you just need to watch it, even you should be able to handle that!"

I tried my best to change the subject.

"Anime~!? Yeah well, that's true, and neither does it cost money..... but I don't know what to watch."

"There's a highly recommended show that's airing right now! It's an anime called 『Sakuragaoka Girls' High School[25] and I'm hooked on it! While it's of course popular with guys, it's also popular with girls, so it should be easy for you to watch! Oh, it just so happens that it'll be airing late night tonight at 1 AM!"

"Fuuhn..... what's the story about?"

"Just like the title says, it's a story set in a girls' high school, but it's really about the friendship between girls. It has a really realistic portrayal of the squabbles and jealousy between girls."

"He-ehh."

Koigasaki returned monotonously, seemingly uninterested.

When the anime was first announced on its official home page, I thought it would be another cliche **Moe**[26] **Yuri**[27] anime and wasn't expecting much from it, but when it started airing, the viewers were all taken aback. The character designs were cute as expected, but the plot was about squabbles and passionate friendship between

girls, and was well received not just by male Yuri fans, but also by female **Otakus**; right now, many have it down as the ultimate show of the season.

"The friendship between the protagonist and her rival is also amazing; while they normally squabble a lot, when the rival girl got bad-mouthed by the delinquent students, the protagonist stuck up for her and said, 'I'll kill whoever talks badly about her'. The line from that particular scene has already turned into a famous quote!"

"Hey, what kind of violent girl is the protagonist? If there's such a girl who can't read the atmosphere, she would be the one who gets beaten to a pulp by the delinquents instead."

"The protagonist is the captain of the karate club."

"I don't get it..... does Suzuki-kun like that anime?"

"Aah, I'm not sure about Suzuki..... I haven't talked about Saku-Girls with Suzuki yet."

Saku-Girls is the abbreviation of 『Sakuragaoka Girls' High School.

"If Suzuki-kun isn't watching it, there's no way I'll watch it, right! I didn't ask about your personal recommendation! It's only because I want to get closer to Suzuki-kun that I want to become an **Otaku**! So, just lend me that Love-something game....."

At that moment, the door to the classroom suddenly opened.

"Eh....."

When the face of the person who had entered the classroom entered my vision, my heart might have stopped.

It was the person I was secretly in love with, Hasegawa Midori.

Crap, did she hear our conversation!? Is my **Otaku** secret still safe!?

I reeled in confusion.

She looked at us and said in an expressionless yet beautiful voice,

"Sorry..... Am I interrupting you?"

"Eh, not at all! Everything is in order, don't worry about it!!"

I ended up letting out a weird voice from getting flustered all of a sudden. What in the world is 'in order'? Why am I using polite language with someone of the same year as me? There are so many comebacks for that strange line I uttered that I just feel like hitting myself now.

Hasegawa Midori appeared to have forgotten something; she went to her locker, took something out and put it in her bag. Then, she left the classroom.

All this while, my eyes were trailing Hasegawa from start to end.

Even though it was just a sentence, I had finally managed to talk to Hasegawa..... It was worth the effort of helping her in the shadows all this while. I felt touched as I savored the lingering memory of our exchange.

"Hey. This is just a thought, but..."

"Eh!?"

After Hasegawa left, Koigasaki's voice returned me to reality.

"Could it be that you are in love with Hasegawa-san?"

"Eh..... huuh!? What're you talking about!? Th-There's no way....."

Was my earlier outburst that bad?

Koigasaki looked at me with eyes filled with incredulity.

"I-It's not like I like....."

"What's with that response? Is it on purpose? It feels like you're denying it on purpose. It's crystal clear, you know?"

"Kuh..... i-is it something bad!? ..... i-it's because she's really cute!"

Feeling it was meaningless to continue denying it, I gave up and admitted it honestly.

"You really don't know your place....."

"Say what you want! Of course, I'm fully aware that it's impossible for us to become lovers right away! Still, I'm sure that Hasegawa thinks of me as a 'good person' at the very least!"

I yelled in indignation. I wasn't acting tough or anything. Each time I helped Hasegawa with her (menial) tasks as a class rep, I felt that she knew it was me when our eyes met (I think).

"I've heard that **Otakus** can get deluded, but I never thought it would be this serious....."

Koigasaki looked at me with dreaded eyes and quivered, fingers in her mouth. Hey, what kind of reaction is that!?

"I'm not deluded! ..... I think....."

After all, only Hasegawa herself would know her own feelings. I just thought that..... there was a possibility that she might feel something for me. I hope she does.

"It all makes sense now..... be it the game I bought the other day, or that novel about capturing the heart of your big sister that you were reading..... all of them are about a plain guy protagonist becoming popular with cute girls

. Since **Otakus** only read such stuff, they've come to believe that they can become popular even without doing anything, huh....."

"Erh, no, I've never thought of something like that....."

"But you don't doubt that Hasegawa likes you, right?"

"Rather than like, there's a possibility she feels something positive towards me....."

"All right, if you are going this far, I will help you verify it tomorrow."

"..... eh?"

Koigasaki made a suggestion that sounded like something that I should be thankful for, in an ominous way.

"Even though I can't talk to guys, I'm not shy with girls . Tomorrow, I'll ask Hasegawa-san personally what she thinks of you."

"Eh....."

"In return, lend me your DS. And along with the Love-whatever game!"

"Hna!?"

If I thought through this rationally, there was no way Koigasaki would help me without any benefit to her.

That was the kind of person she was.

"Didn't I just tell you that I can't live without my DS for even a day! And you want to take that away from me. ....."

"Are you really okay with just playing games every day and getting the girls in your games to fall in love with you? Don't you want to know about what Hasegawa thinks of you?"

"Well, if I had to choose between knowing and not knowing, of course I'd rather know, but....."

"Then it's decided. I'll help you ask her tomorrow."

I gradually got more and more interested in going along with Koigasaki's game.

I finally relented and emphasized to Koigasaki that she had to make sure Hasegawa didn't catch on to my feelings.

I was filled with mixed emotions..... on one hand, I wanted to know, while on the other hand, I was afraid to know.

The next day came. Koigasaki went to talk to Hasegawa during the brief interval between lessons. The sight of two beautiful yet different types of girls talking attracted the attention of the guys in class.

While looking at them, my heart fluttered furiously, as if it were about to burst.

"There's a guy sitting behind you, right?"

That was the first thing Koigasaki said when we met behind the school gym during noon break.

".....eh? Kiritani? .....eeh!? Don't tell me Hasegawa likes Kiritani....."

I immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion; Koigasaki ignored me and continued,

"Hasegawa-san thought that he's Kashiwada."

"......eh.....?"

I couldn't comprehend what Koigasaki was saying.

"When I mentioned your name, Hasegawa thought for a while and said, '..... is that the name of the boy sitting at the very back next to the window.....'."

"Wha.....!?"

"In other words, Hasegawa isn't even aware of your existence. My condolences."

She didn't even know my name.

The truth hurt too much.

"Since she's not even aware of you, I can't go about asking her what she thinks of you, so I didn't. All right, give it to me."

Koigasaki then stretched out both her hands to me, while I was on the verge of tears.

"Eh?"

"Don't 'eh' me. I helped you ask her, so lend me your DS. And also the game."

She could still say that right when I was suffering from major damage. She really was a devil. Since I had promised, I had no choice but to hand over my DS, together with the Love-Minus disc inside. I kept emphasizing to her not to delete my saved data.

"I put in so much effort, and yet..... she didn't realize it , huh....."

I lamented while handing over my console.

Does this mean that all the effort I put in has come to naught?

"What effort?"

"I helped out in her duties as the class rep. From the shadows."

"What do you mean by 'from the shadows'?"

"Well, when Hasegawa wasn't around, I would quickly help her finish with the menial stuff....."

"Scary! Creepy! Rather, if she wasn't around, there's no way she would know, right!"

"Erh, no, I felt that she realized it was me during those few times when our eyes met....."

"You felt that when your eyes met? You must have been imagining things."

I sunk to the pits of despair when Koigasaki delivered her final blow.

"There's no point to your kindness if she doesn't even realize it. You should just tell her upfront that you want to help her."

"Won't that kind of candid approach be annoying!? Not just to her, but to the rest, won't I look like I was trying to score points with my 'kindness'!? It would make me look like a conceited, pretentious fool."

Even though I was throwing out an excuse, the truth was, I was just afraid to tell her upfront that I wanted to help her.

I've always been like that, not just when it comes to love. For example, when I'm riding the subway, if there's a granny standing before me, due to my shyness, I'll just stand up from my seat without even saying "Here you go ". I was that kind of timid and shy boy.

"Besides, if I do that to a beautiful girl like Hasegawa, I will look like some kind of lusty nut, won't I? Not just Hasegawa herself, but the people around will feel creeped out, won't they?"

Koigasaki made an exasperated face.

"Fuuhn, so in other words, you are trying to keep up with the times and aiming to become a herbivorous guy? You don't want to look like someone with an appetite for girls, but a nice goody kind of guy?"

"Erm, no, it's not like I have that kind of intent....."

"Ah, my bad. It's not 'keep up with the times', but 'stay in the out-dated times'. herbivorous guys aren't really popular these days."

Koigasaki heaved an exasperated sigh.

"I don't know much about keeping up with the times or not, but don't herbivorous guys get a lot of attention?"

"Like I said, that was in the past! I've heard nothing but bad things about herbivorous guys from the other girls. Stuff like 'I made it so obvious, yet he didn't ask me for my number', or 'we finally exchanged numbers but he never asked me out', or 'he's really not into girls but guys , right?'. In the end, the carnivorous guys are the best, is what they concluded."

I s-see..... I've always been jealous of those herbivorous, air-head-looking guys that are popular with girls, though those are probably just limited to the good looking guys, so that's how the current view is right now.

"And thus, I think you should be like a carnivore for now and try inviting Hasegawa-san to hang out~!"

"..... eeh!?"

I wavered before Koigasaki's crazy suggestion.

"Hna, I can't even talk to her. How in the world am I supposed to do that!?"

"She doesn't even know your name the way things stand, you know!? Are you okay with that!?"

"Of course not, but....."

"You really are useless. Can't be helped, I'll talk to Hasegawa-san for you."

"..... eh? ..... what, did you just say....."

I doubted my ears.

"Are you serious!? Are you seriously going to invite Hasegawa to hang out with me!? Are you an angel!?"

"Be more courteous with me. I'm only doing this because you are useless and will be totally helpless without me. Learn to be grateful, seriously."

"You aren't kidding me!? Woooaaahhh, you really are a good person!!"

I'd always thought Koigasaki was a devil, but she's actually a really good person, isn't she?

"In return."

"Ehh!?"

"Invite Suzuki."

"....."

That's right. I keep forgetting it, but this girl would never help me out unconditionally.

"Wha. Aah, jeez, I get it! In return, you are going to invite Hasegawa for me, right!?"

"Of course. You too, make sure you bring Suzuki along , get it!?"

Well, if I consider this calmly, it doesn't sound like a bad deal. Since there's a chance I could get to hang out with Hasegawa.

"Ah, but you can't talk to girls and I can't talk to guys, and Hasegawa-san is the quiet-type, so can I invite Miki to liven things up? She's not shy and pretty boisterous, and can definitely rouse things up."

Miki..... was probably Sasagawa Miki, who seemed to be Koigasaki's closest female friend in class. She was even more **Gyaru**-ish than Koigasaki.

"I see. That certainly will help."

To be honest, I couldn't deal well with types like Sasagawa (rather, I can't deal well with any **Gyaru**), but, her presence as an ice-breaker would be a welcome one.

All that was left was to invite another guy, and Kiritani would probably do. The members were perfect. I started looking forward to it.

"You know, I was thinking, before hanging out with Hasegawa-san to get closer to her, how about working on your **Otaku**-ish appearance first?"

"Eh.....?"

I couldn't let that slide.

"By **Otaku**-ish, you mean me?"

"Who else is here?"

Wh-What did she say.....?

"I've been wondering about this... Even though you don't want people to know you're an **Otaku**, your appearance gives you away instantly, you know?"

Was that what she meant by me having an **Otaku**-ish appearance.....?

"How come!? I'm not wearing glasses or a bandana, I'm not fat, and I don't have checkered shirts in my casual wear. Totally not **Otaku**-ish, right!?"

"What kind of basis is that..... For argument's sake, even if it isn't obvious that you're an **Otaku**, no one would doubt it if told that you're one. That's how you look."

"What!? T-Tell me where in particular!?"

"Everything. With that kind of appearance, it's no wonder that Hasegawa-san doesn't even remember your name."

"....."

My knees shook and buckled, I slouched forward and my palms touched the ground, making an "orz" pose as a result.

Since my terrible state in middle school, I wanted to at least look normal and worked hard at that, but it seemed like my efforts were far from enough.

"But it can't be helped! I wasn't born with good looks, and there's an apparent limit to how much I can do with effort alone. And besides, Hasegawa might not be a Sweet(LOL) who places a guy's worth on his appearance and may not have 'looks' as a criterion in her guy....."

"..... pisses me off."

"Eh?"

Was she mad because I called her Sweet(LOL) in her face for the first time? But no, did she even know the meaning of Sweet(LOL)?

"It can't be helped because I wasn't born with good looks!? Are you an idiott!?"

..... Asuka?[28]

Nah, but why did she suddenly snap?

"Indeed, a person's genes may play a part in it, but most people actually take the trouble and pay the money to polish themselves up and make themselves look good! And someone who doesn't even make an effort can say, ' It can't be helped because I wasn't born with good looks'!? Are all **Otakus** such self-deprecating people!? This pisses me off, it really pisses me off!"

Koigasaki was in a real rage, and raved incessantly without even waiting for my reaction.

"How can you like a cute girl and yet be indifferent to your own appearance? How do you even expect her to come to like you!?"

I went into dumbfounded shock at the countless jolting words that had rolled off Koigasaki's tongue.

"Even if you tell me that..... what should I do about it..... I've been living like this for the last 15 years without caring about looking good..... I won't know what I can do to make myself look good at this point....."

Even if I was labeled as self-deprecating, it couldn't be helped, since it was the honest truth.

"If you just look around you, you should notice it. There's hardly anyone like you, who doesn't trim his eyebrows or style his hair, and who wears his pants high up with a fully-buttoned uniform, is there?"

"Eh.....?"

Eyebrows, hair style, uniform's buttons, pants..... do I really have to change so much about my dressing alone?

"T-Tell me more specifically what I should do.....!?"

There might be some progress now that I knew there were lots of things I needed to change, but if I didn't know how to go about changing them, then I wouldn't be able to do anything about them.

"Go figure it out yourself! Go buy some magazines or something?"

"Magazines!? What kind of magazines contain such info!?"

I was getting desperate.

"Aah jeez, you're annoying! Like I said, go figure it out yourself! I have to go think about how to invite the girls to hang out, so I'm going home now!"

With a sour attitude, Koigasaki evaded me and went home.

Koigasaki's angry voice kept reverberating in my head throughout the entire day.

"Most people actually take the trouble and pay the money to polish themselves up and make themselves look good!"

"How can you like a cute girl and yet be indifferent to your own appearance? How do you even expect her to come to like you!?"

"If you just look around you, you should notice it. There's hardly anyone like you, who doesn't trim his eyebrows or style his hair, and who wears his pants high up with a fully-buttoned uniform, is there?"

Though I was pissed, everything was right on the mark.

Since I entered high school, I was desperately trying to hide my **Otaku** secret. However, I was too focused in hiding my **Otaku** secret and had never given any thought on how to make myself look good.

In the first place, will the manner of wearing my uniform really make such a difference?

With this doubt in mind, the next day, I started observing the male students around me in school.

What I saw surprised me.

Even though it was the same uniform, there were different ways of wearing it.

There were guys who wore it the way I did. There were also guys who wore a cardigan instead of a blazer. And yet others wore vests. Some had their necktie properly tightened to the top like me. Others wore it loosely. And also there were those without any neckties.

"Kasshii, morning!"

A clear voice suddenly called out just as I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Suzuki..... morning."

He was the same energetic, cool guy today.

On top of the shirt that was stipulated by the school, he was wearing a vest that seemed a little big for him, and pants that were below waist level. But his legs were long. His feet weren't in loafers like everyone else, but stylish-looking sneakers.

This guy isn't just good-looking, he's stylish..... This was a new fact that I just realized.

"Suzuki, why are you so stylish even though you're an **Otaku**..... like I thought, is it because you don't want people to know that you're an **Otaku**.....?"

"Eh? I'm really not hiding the fact that I'm an **Otaku**."

I doubted what my ears heard.

"Eh.....?"

"See, I have Rinka on the phone."

The standby screen of the iPhone Suzuki showed me had an animated Rinka from LoveMinus switching poses

and expressions. It was an official app from LoveMinus. He had that openly on his cellphone..... with this, everyone would know that he was an **Otaku**. And yet, those reactions of the girls in class..... Does it mean it's ok for a good-looking guy to be an **Otaku**? A discrimination against looks.

"And it's not like I'm dressing stylishly."

"No, you are stylish! Even though I've never seen you in casual wear, there's no doubt that you're stylish!"

I might be a dunce when it comes to dressing and fashion, but I could easily tell from Suzuki's hairstyle and how he wore his uniform that compared to the ordinary guy, he was paying special attention to his appearance.

"Nah, it's all because of my big sis's nagging..... 'I can't stand my little brother looking like a plain, nerdy **Otaku**! At the very least, pay attention to your clothes!' And she just bought my clothes for me on her own. Well, even though initially it was because of that, I myself grew to like my clothes, so it's fine."

"She buys your clothes for you? What a great big sister ! "

"Great big sister.....? No way..... I have zero interest in the older girl archetype all because of that big sister of mine....."

In a rare gloomy voice, Suzuki muttered with a pained look. Seemed like he didn't like his big sister.

Which reminded me, I wasn't into younger girl archetypes all thanks to that ultra-sadistic, violent, middle school **Fujoshi** little sister of mine. Next time, I would like to talk more with Suzuki about how bad our sisters were. Our conversation ended there as I reached my classroom and we parted ways.

Upon entering the classroom, I went to my seat, and looked at the guys around me. However, since my seat was two rows from the back, I could only see the backs of the male students.

I observed the hairstyles of the male students in my class. There were guys who dyed their hair, guys who retained their black hair, guys with crew cuts, guys with long hair, guys with their hair standing, and also guys like me who left their hair unstyled.....

There were only very few students who were with unstyled hair like me.

After homeroom ended, the teacher left the classroom.

"Kashiwada, why did you keep looking around."

I turned around at Kiritani's voice from behind.

"......!!"

I was surprised.

I had never really paid any attention to Kiritani's face before, but he actually had his hair properly styled and eyebrows neat and trimmed.

While Kiritani didn't have a good-looking face, compared to me, he paid more attention to his looks. This was the first time I realized that.

"..... Kiritani, don't tell me I look really lame?"

"Eh? Isn't it a bit late to be asking that?"

I slouched across my desk in shock, and escaping from reality, I drifted into sleep.

"Kashiwada....."

A voice called out. As I awoke and looked up, there was a super beautiful girl before me. Ah, is this perhaps an angel?

"That sleep mark on your forehead made your face an even more unbearable sight to behold."

Said the demon called Koigasaki.

Made my face an even more unbearable sight to behold, which means, normally my face is already an unbearable sight to behold?

"Aah, school's already over, huh....."

The clock showed it was now 3.30 in the afternoon, and Koigasaki and I were the only ones remaining in the classroom.

Since our last conversation, I'd been observing the guys the entire day. Hosokawa from the soccer club. Miwa from the baseball club. Sano from the table tennis club. Sasaki from the literature club. Hashimoto from the computer club. Yamada from the manga research club.

I was so into my observation activities that Kiritani became worried and had said to me, "Your eyes have been chasing after guys' asses all day. Did you decide to turn gay because Hasegawa's out of reach for you?". And the result was.

"Even guys work hard at their hairstyles and eyebrows , huh..... At worst, in the lame guy ranking in our class, I'm probably among the top ten....."

My eyes couldn't help but turn distant while murmuring that.

"Huuh? What're you talking about? Not top 10, you are in the top 3."

I was kind of hoping that she would refute my proclamation, but instead, she rubbed it in a much worse manner, and I felt like crying.

"So, how did it go?"

The tone of Koigasaki's voice suddenly changed, and she looked at me intently with hopeful eyes.

"Eh? How did what go?"

"Is Suzuki-kun coming?"

"Eh, ah..... I forgot."

I just remembered. I'd totally forgotten I was supposed to invite Suzuki and Kiritani to hang out with us.

"You didn't ask him!? I can't believe this!"

It was all because my head had been filled with thoughts on eyebrows, hairstyles and men's clothes.

"Aah jeez, you're seriously terrible. And I even invited Hasegawa-san already....."

"Eh, really!? Hasegawa is coming!?"

"Ah ..... yeah."

Koigasaki's words sent my mind into a whirl.

"You're kidding!?"

Even though it wouldn't be just the two of us, I would be able to hang out with Hasegawa. Is it ok for such a

wonderful thing to happen in reality? Frankly, because of the unsociable feeling that Hasegawa gave out, I thought for sure that she wouldn't come.

"Surprisingly, she agreed to it rather readily. I've also talked to Miki and she's coming along to karaoke. If you don't bring Suzuki along, I'll change plans and it'll be just us girls hanging out."

"Hna!?"

"It's natural, right. If Suzuki doesn't come, it won't make the slightest sense for us to hang out with you."

To Koigasaki, I was merely an existence used for bringing her closer to Suzuki. Even though I already knew it, clearly saying that out to me really made me mad.

"Your worry is wasted! I'll get him to come no matter what!"

I silently swore to myself that I'd definitely talk to Suzuki about this tomorrow.

"Which reminds me, there's another thing that I wanted to ask you."

While saying that, Koigasaki took out something from her bag.

What appeared was the DS console that I had lent her.

"I tried out the Love-something you lent me yesterday, but all you ever do in the game is study and go to club activities, and I'm very sick of it. How much longer will it take to finish it?"

Koigasaki switched on the console and loaded the game. On the display, it showed 『Day 20.

"There's no real end to the game. You enter the next mode after getting confessed to. You'll reach the bad end if you don't get a confession after a hundred days, though....."

"Eeh!? Then I have to keep repeating the same thing until I get a confession?"

"Well, yeah. If you don't like it, give it back to me."

You dare complain to me when you were the one who stole my DS from me, this girl. I can't even play it when I want to.

"Hey, you've advanced pretty far ahead, right? If I look at yours, will it be akin to me having advanced that far? And then I can talk about this game with Suzuki-kun when we go for karaoke ~"

"Even if you say that, I think the fact that you didn't play the game would still be exposed..... Rather, are you planning to talk about LoveMinus in front of everyone?"

"Stop prattling and quickly show yours to me."

Left without a choice, I loaded my saved data while she hurried me.

"By the way, in my case, I've already gotten a confession from Nono-san and I'm now in lovers mode."

"Fuuhn, you go into lovers mode after getting a confession?"

By the way, I was free during the spring break and was playing it in real-time mode, but I couldn't do that after entering school and switched to skip mode.

"It's good timing that there's an upcoming date tomorrow, so why don't I show you the date scene?"

Maybe because she felt tired from standing, Koigasaki took a seat in front of me and peered into the screen. In order to see the screen, she came rather close to me, and I became a little nervous.

"Hey, why do you keep touching the screen? What's that about?"

"This is skinship! There's also a trick to this; if I don't touch Nono-san and make her feel good when there are hardly any people around, she will get angry."

"....."

Koigasaki kept quiet. She seemed to be focusing on the screen. I continued playing the game while explaining it earnestly to her.

"Ahh! This is where Nono-san wants a kiss, and it will also turn out badly if I don't do this properly. It's kind of troublesome when you aren't used to it."

"....."

With a practiced hand, I succeeded in kissing Nono-san.

"Whew. It's tough to even do a kiss. Well, it'll be easy once you get used to it ~"

"Hey, is it ok? Is it ok for me to say this? I'm feeling really creeped out."

After saying that, for the first time, Koigasaki's gaze shifted away from Nono-san on the console's screen. Koigasaki's scornful gaze was directed at me, not at the game.

"You! You were the one who asked me to show you where I stopped, right!? If you want to ridicule the game, then return it to me!"

"I'm not creeped out by the game, but by you! You just kept prattling on smugly, explaining stuff that I didn't even ask about, and you have that smirk on your face..... it's really creepy. Not just me, any girl would have been creeped out by that big time....."

I realized that even though Koigasaki had sat rather close to me to look at the screen, she was a considerable distance away from me now.

"You were really smug about it, but do you really think that actual dates will work out the same way as in the game?"

"Eh, I've n-never thought like that....."

"That's a relief! If a girl dated you now, she's sure to be creeped out and that would be the end of it. I'm worried about the karaoke. Be careful not to get any weird ideas and start acting creepily towards the girls."

How much more is this girl going to keep ridiculing me, I wondered. She's the one who asked me to play it in front of her, and this is what I get.

"But, you know, if you look at stuff like how a girl will get in a bad mood if you make a weird choice during a date, or how she will get angry if you touch her when there are lots of people around, or that you won't get a confession if you get too friendly with the other girls, it's pretty realistic! I did more or less learn some things about the psychology of girls through LoveMinus and other Galge, you know!"

"..... are you seriously saying that?"

Beyond the level of amazement, Koigasaki looked intently at me with pitying eyes.

"Well, of course I know very well that games and reality are two different things! What I wanted to say is that dating sims these days are pretty realistically made... ..."

"Fuuhn..... all right. Then, why don't we play a game now?"

Said Koigasaki for some reason. I had a pretty unpleasant feeling about this.

"Let's do a mock date. You and me."

"D-Date!?"

"Like I said, it's a mock date! Don't keep making those exaggerated reactions, it's creepy."

"A-Aah, a mock date huh..... So what's this about?"

"Think of me as Hasegawa-san and go on a practice date with me. In the unlikely event that things move ahead between you and Hasegawa-san during the karaoke, you might end up arranging a date with her, right? You won't want to fail big time and get hated for it , right?"

"A date with Hasegawa-san!?"

"That's right. You can't say for sure that it won't happen, right?"

A date with just Hasegawa. Just thinking of it makes me feel anxious and distraught.

"Here are the rules! If you say or do something that turns a girl off, I'll keep deducting points from you. You'll start off with a hundred points. If you have more than 50 points left at the end of the date, I'll do whatever you say."

As if she'd just thought of something great, Koigasaki prattled on in a self-satisfied manner.

"What's with those rules..... how do we determine when the date is over?"

"You've got a point, now's already past four..... how about we set the end time at six. At any rate, I have a curfew and need to be back by 7.30, so that will be just about right for me."

I smelled something fishy about this. It just wasn't possible that this girl would go to such an extent for me unconditionally.

"However, if your points go to zero before the date ends.....", continued Koigasaki.

"Then.....?"

"You'll have to do whatever I say."

That was her goal right from the start.

"Don't be ridiculous! In the first place, isn't it biased having only you decide on the scoring criteria? This game puts me at a complete disadvantage!"

"Of course, I intend to be extremely fair in my judgement to the extent of disregarding my personal gain in this."

Koigasaki then added.

"Fine, I was just being kind enough to make this proposal for your sake. If you don't believe me, it's fine. Oh yeah ~ you're just an incompetent **Otaku** who's only confident in dating sims and gets cold feet when it comes to real dating, aren't you ~?"

Even I was well aware of how my blood went to my head from Koigasaki's provocation.

"..... fine, I'll do it! However, if I win, you are going to really do whatever I say!"

I declared before I realized it.

"The deal's on. Then, let's go to Harajuku."

"Eh!? Harajuku!? Why all the way there....."

"There's a shop I want to visit! Well, Shibuya might do as well, but I want to eat the crêpe at Harajuku."

..... I couldn't help but get the strong impression I was merely getting dragged along to accompany Koigasaki on her personal errand.

After leaving school, we boarded the subway, transferred lines along the way, and finally reached Harajuku.

It was my first time to Harajuku. It seemed like Koigasaki came here often with her friends after school.

"Haah, my dream was to come here with my boyfr..... with Suzuki on a date in our uniforms, so why am I here at Harajuku alone with you after school....."

"Weren't you the one who suggested it!?"

I almost snapped without thinking after hearing Koigasaki's willful proclamation.

Normally, in most cases, a female character from a manga or light novel who utters a line like that is a **Tsundere**[29] who's hiding her embarrassment with a Tsun line, but, when I considered that, I felt hollow knowing that what Koigasaki said was a hundred percent without a doubt her true feelings.

"All right, we're going to begin now ~"

Said Koigasaki when we exited Harajuku station.

"Even if you said that it's a mock date, I won't know what to do right away."

I was struck dumbfounded when I was told to start all of a sudden.

"Didn't I tell you to think of me as Hasegawa-san! The date has already started. If you say another dumb thing like that I'm going to start deducting points!"

Scary. So I can't even let my guard down and engage in idle talk.

"Imagine you are on a date with Hasegawa-san, just bring me to where you would want to bring her."

"Just bring you....."

I'm at a loss. This is my first time at Harajuku, and you want me to bring you to someplace in a district that I don't even know?

"Minus 5 points!"

"Huuh!?"

I made an objecting utterance at the sudden unreasonable deduction.

Not even three minutest had passed since it started.

"Since this is the first date, it should be natural for the guy to plan all the activities, right? If both of you are at a loss, the girl would feel troubled, right?"

"..... I see."

Even though it was annoying, what Koigasaki said was strangely convincing. Just so I wouldn't forget what Koigasaki says before the date is over, I decided to note it

down using the memo function of my cellphone. Since her words represented the modern girl's perspective, I could reference it even if it made my blood boil.

Thinking of that, I started the memo function of my cellphone and starting taking notes.....

"Minus 5 points."

"Huuh!? Why!? Why!?"

I began to resist, thinking that it was totally unreasonable of her.

"I hate guys who play with their phones on a date. To top it off, it's only the first date and not like you've already gone steady."

"Ah, indeed....."

Once again, I accepted her explanation.

Be it the memo function or the mail function, from the other party's point of view, it didn't change the fact that I was playing with my phone.

After explaining to Koigasaki that I was noting down her advice (actually her complaints), I was told it would be allowed next time if I first announced that I was going to take notes. Why is it that I have to abase myself to the point of needing her permission to do even that? I don't get it myself.

After getting several points deducted when the date had only just started and we hadn't done anything yet, I pulled myself together and continued with the mock date .

At any rate, I decided to just enter Takeshita Street, which was just in front of me. Even though it was a weekday, there were many youngsters. The youngsters came and went before me in their distinct, personalized fashion, drawing my attention to them.

"Minus 15 points."

I kept my mouth shut as we walked along Takeshita Street in case I got my points deducted for saying the wrong thing, but Koigasaki once again declared that I had my points deducted. And to make it worse, it was 15 points.

"What's wrong!? I didn't do anything, right!?"

"Firstly, you walk with a slouched back. Most girls don't like guys who slouch."

I was struck speechless. Indeed, I do acknowledge that I slouch. Most **Otakus** slouch (counting those around me).

"Even so, isn't that too many points?"

"Also, you walk too fast. Since you are on a date, you should match your speed to the girl's. Also, why are you keeping quiet while walking? You should strive to have an enjoyable conversation with the girl. In total, minus 15 points."

"Kuh....."

While I have a few objections I could raise against that unreasonable appraisal, she wasn't entirely wrong, so I didn't say anything. Just into the first ten minutes, and my score..... was seventy-five.....

Following her instructions to start an enjoyable conversation, for now, I asked her monotonously,

"Well, then..... is there anywhere you would like to go ?"

It was an unreasonable thing to ask myself to see and treat Koigasaki as Hasegawa, so I couldn't help but purposely use a monotonous tone. If she were to deduct my points because of this, I would definitely raise an objection, but she let it slide.

"I want to go to Liz!"

"Liz? What's that?"

"You don't even know about Liz Lisa ~!? Minus 5 points."

"Hey! That was just your personal opinion, right!"

"No, guys who are clueless on how to dress are actually drawn to it."

From Koigasaki's explanation, 『Liz is the abbreviation of 『Liz Lisa and seemed to be a brand of clothes that Koigasaki liked. And somehow, there seemed to be a shop outlet along this Takeshita Street.

We entered the Liz Lisa store found in the middle of Takeshita Street.

Pink, white, and other lightly-colored frilly, girly dresses that Koigasaki seemed to like dangled around.

The store assistants and customers were of course all girls, making me, the only guy, feel quite uncomfortable.

"Sorry, I'll wait outside....."

"Minus 5."

"Was just kidding ~! Let's look at the clothes together!"

I barely got away without the deduction.

"Ah ~ a new line did come out ~! Really cute ~!"

Upon entering the store, Koigasaki entered her own world as she started looking at the clothes.

The store that she wanted to visit was probably referring to this, I supposed.

Looking at the customer demographics, most of them appeared to be high school girls as expected; there were both plain-looking ones and glitzy **Gyaru**s. Some also wore frightfully short skirts.

"Minus 10 points."

"Why!?"

Koigasaki, who should have been absorbed in the clothes, was looking at me with a disgusted look on her face.

"You're a contemptible guy for looking at other girls instead of expressing interest in your girlfriend's shopping during a date. Also, you should help me carry my stuff while I'm shopping. How inconsiderate of you."

"Other girls? I was just observing the customer demographics!"

"Liar. I know that your eyes have been trailing after a single girl."

Koigasaki said as she turned her eyes to the girl with the short skirt, whom I had been looking at. She was really sharp when it came to such things.....

"Ma'am ~! Would you like to try this out?"

As Koigasaki returned to looking at the clothes, a **Gyaru**-like store assistant spoke to her. It was a store assistant passionate about her job, though she hadn't been much help from the time Koigasaki started looking at the clothes.

While staring off into space, Koigasaki went to try out two one-piece dresses.

After a while, having finished changing, Koigasaki emerged from the fitting room.

"Ma'am, it suits you ~!"

When I looked at Koigasaki who had drawn the curtain open, I was at a loss for words.

Koigasaki, who was clad in a pink frilly one-piece dress, was cute like a doll, which was by no means an exaggeration.

Is this dress special-made for Koigasaki, I wondered..... it truly 『suited her in that sense. I felt sorry for the store assistant beside her, who was wearing clothes of the same brand.

Even though I didn't want to admit it, I was completely taken away.

"Minus 5 points."

When I heard that unpleasant proclamation, I returned to my senses.

"Why are you keeping quiet in front of a girl who's trying out clothes? Whether it looks good or not, it's basic courtesy to give some compliment!"

"Wha! Ah, erm, it's just that..... it looks too good on you that I was taken away and at a loss for words....."

"Minus another 5 points. You don't need to go so far as to give me cold flattery. You must have made that excuse because you got points deducted, right?"

"That's not....."

Even though I complimented her honestly, it was taken as flattery. Well, while it was annoying to get my points deducted, it was better than having her get ahead of herself.

After that, Koigasaki tried the other piece, and even though the store assistant was enthusiastically complimenting her, she left the store without buying it.

Koigasaki single-handedly and politely brushed off the store assistant who had been complimenting her desperately, but because I didn't help her with it, I had my points deducted again.

After exiting the store, we starting walking along Takeshita Street again.

"Hey, we've been walking along Takeshita Street randomly for quite a while. Do you have a destination in mind?"

"Eh, there's no way I would have one, right?"

"Minus 5 points."

"Hey, don't I even get to ask a leading question!?"

"Ah, I want a crêpe!"

Koigasaki ran off to a crêpe shop along the street. I was also hungry, so we both ended up eating crêpes.

"Minus 10 points."

Koigasaki, who had bought her crêpe, turned to me and said it in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Why!?"

"Why did you just allow the girl to pay for herself?"

My eyes turned into dots when I heard her words.

"Eeh!? Ah, I'm supposed to treat you!? Why should I treat someone like you....."

"I didn't explicitly tell you to treat me. But during a date, you have to show that you are willing to pay for it. The girl might decline your offer, but right here, you have to at least say something like, 'Let me pay for this'."

Indeed, I'd heard from somewhere that the guy should be treating the girl during a date. A man needs money, huh..... If there were an upcoming date, until the day of the date itself, I would have to work part-time.....

Following that, I got points deducted for stuff like 『*don't make a mess of yourself when eating a crêpe*』, 『*you didn't ask the girl if she would like to take a bite from your crêpe*』 (first point aside, I just couldn't agree with the second point).

After finishing our crêpes, we continued walking along Takeshita Street. When I took a look at the time on the standby screen of my cellphone, it was just past five. There was another hour more or less before the game would end.

"Minus 5 points."

"Why!?"

"You gave off the feeling you were wondering what else to do when you looked at the time. And your face

said that, *meh, there's still time left*. If you do that during a real date, I would think that you didn't have fun being around me."

Indeed, I might have had that kind of expression just now, but it was because this wasn't a real date but a really terrifying game..... However, I didn't feel like protesting, so I just let it slide.

"Ah, since we're already here at Harajuku, why don't you take this chance to shop for the clothes you'll wear to karaoke? Walking with you has been really embarrassing . I'd like you to buy some clothes and change into them. If possible."

Even while I continued receiving the damage inflicted by the cruel words of Koigasaki, I did agree it was a good idea to buy some clothes in preparation for the karaoke. After all, I didn't have anything presentable to wear for hanging out with girls.

"You're right. Let's buy something here, then!"

I immediately wanted to head for the men's clothing store nearby. On the front of the building were displays of 2000 yen T-shirts, which meant they carried stuff within my financial means.

"Ehh, here!? No, this shop's a little..... It's still fine if only one item in your getup came from this store, but it would be a little too much if you got everything from just this store....."

"Seriously.....? Even if you say that, I have no idea where I can get the right clothes. What kind of store is good?"

"Uhmm, won't it be safe to go with Arrows? If I remember correctly, the main store's in Harajuku....."

Koigasaki took out her cellphone from her pocket to look it up. She found the map of that store called 『Arrows with her smartphone, started walking while looking at the map, and I followed without saying a word. After walking for a straight ten minutes, we reached our destination at last.

"United, Arrows.....?"

"It's a little expensive, but I think it will be a safer bet."

I read the Romaji of the brand name, but I might have read it wrongly. It seemed like a brand store for guys.

I entered the store timidly. Both the store assistants and the customers were stylishly dressed, and I felt a little embarrassed.

"Ah, something like this will be good."

Koigasaki affixed her eyes onto the clothes worn by a mannequin. I didn't really get it, but the clothes certainly did look kind of stylish. I casually took hold of the price tag. And got flabbergasted.

"Ten, thousand.....?"

"Well, it should be around this much."

If just a shirt alone would set me back by ten thousand yen, then if I got everything I needed from this store, wouldn't it easily cost me over fifty thousand yen?

"Ah, the clothes here are nice, too ~!"

Koigasaki scoured around happily. It seemed like a stylish person could have fun just looking at clothes even if she wasn't the one wearing them. While I pretended to look at the selection of clothes, in truth, buying clothes from this store had been completely eliminated from my options. Where would I get the money?

After a while, Koigasaki made an exasperated look and asked me,

"You aren't buying anything?"

"I'll buy on another day."

I replied and the two of us left the store.

"Hey, what will we do now?"

"Hm, why don't we go somewhere to rest up?"

After walking for quite a bit, our legs were tired. We went into a nearby cafe.

"Fuh, I'm beat ~"

After sitting down in a chair, I said that naturally.

It was partly because I was tired from all the walking, but mostly I was just mentally exhausted from paying too much attention to avoid getting my points deducted.

"Minus 5 points."

This came just when I was thinking about it.

"You sound like an old man! You can't say that you're tired in the middle of a date."

I was already used to getting my points deducted. How many points do I have left, I wondered. Since Koigasaki had been keeping track of the points with the memo function of her cellphone, I could find out if I just asked, but I was too afraid to hear the answer.

"Excuse me."

After glancing once at the menu, I called the waiter.

"Minus 5 points! I haven't even decided what I want, so why are you already calling the waiter!"

Koigasaki fumed while looking at the menu.

"Aah, sorry."

Since the other person was Koigasaki, I just couldn't stay considerate of her.

Afterwards, while eating, things such as eating messily , swinging a destitute aura, or making noise while drinking my juice got my points deducted.

"Then again, how do you know so much if you've never gone out with a guy before?"

"It's nothing. At school, while I was having girls' talk with my friends, I got to hear their opinions. Like 'this kind of guy won't do', 'I didn't like that about the guy I met the other day', and so on and so forth."

Do high school girls these days talk about such things at school? Sounds scary.

"I see."

I had completely forgotten about our mock date and was chatting with Koigasaki, but, when I looked at the time, it was already 6.05 PM.

"Ah! It's already time! All right!"

If I remembered correctly, we had agreed that if I had 50 points or more left at the end of the date, she would listen to whatever I say.

Naturally, I hadn't been keeping track of my points remaining, and couldn't even make a guess.

"What do you mean by 'all right'? Your points had already reached zero."

"Eeeeeeeehhhhh."

I cried out at the shocking truth.

"Did I really lose that many points!?"

"You don't believe my words? Here."

Koigasaki held out her cellphone, and I saw on her memo screen the itemized deducted points.

At Koigasaki's prompt, I tallied the deducted points. My 100 points got gradually deducted..... it was regrettable, but just right after we entered this cafe, my points reached zero.

"Damn....."

"Then, as we agreed, you will listen to whatever I say ~"

Following behind Koigasaki, who was all smiles, we left the cafe. We returned to Takeshita Street and headed in the direction of the Riz Riza store.

"Don't tell me....."

"You are going to buy a one-piece dress from Riz for me."

"Wha.....!? By the way, how much is it?"

"Around ten thousand yen?"

A rush of air escaped me at the overly high price tag. For a penalty game for a high school student, this was too high a price no matter how you look at it. Did this girl know the meaning of 'being reserved'?

While Koigasaki was trying to decide between the two dresses she had tried out earlier, I looked inside my wallet with a feeling of despair. Then, I reached a realization a little too late.

"I only have 2327 yen left....."

"Huuh!? Are you just making up a random excuse to avoid buying the dress....."

Indignant, Koigasaki peered into my wallet and knew that I was telling the truth.

She sighed out in exasperation.

To be honest, in the bank, I still had several thousand saved up from the New Year's gift money I'd received, but I decided not to say anything even if she threatened me.

"To think that you're so poor....."

"Eh, erh, isn't this normal for an average high school freshman?"

I'd never worked at a part-time job, and since my pocket money amounted to only five thousand yen a month, after spending it on games, manga, or going out to have fun, pretty much nothing was left. How do Riajuu get so stylish, I wondered. It takes a lot of money to become stylish. Is working a part-time job the only way?

"Forget it. I'll get Dad to buy the dress for me next time . Aah, but Mom will get angry if she learns..... I have to make sure she doesn't find out....."

Koigasaki murmured something.

"Eh, forget it, you said..... so it's okay even if I don't buy it!?"

"It's not a matter of being okay or not. You can't even afford it, right?"

Koigasaki was disgusted with me, and returned the dress she was holding back to its original place.

"Aah jeez, this is really a downer. You're really unbelievable."

"Aah..... I'm sorry....."

Even though Koigasaki's demands were rather unreasonable, a promise is a promise, so I apologized for my failure to keep it.

"Don't think that you can get away with just this. You owe me one. I'll have you return the favor next time for sure. In one way or another."

Koigasaki's mood turned sour after this, and she took out her cellphone to meddle with it.

Just earlier, she was harping on me not to use my cellphone during a date so the other party wouldn't feel unpleasant, and now she's doing this. Aah jeez, this girl's personality is really bad. Even if her cuteness has no parallel, I would definitely never want to go out with this girl. This thought came to me once again, and I proceeded to turn on my data and started checking out the bulletin board that I frequented.

Walking from Takeshita Street to the station, and even on the train, both of us continued playing with our cellphones without saying a word, but a question surfaced in my mind and I asked Koigasaki.

"Where are you transferring?"

"Akihabara."

"Eh, where's your house?"

What came out of Koigasaki's mouth was the station for our school.

"Seriously!? Isn't your house really close to the school!"

Does that mean she walks to school every day?

There was nothing more enviable than the fact she didn't experience the need to rush to school every morning.

"Ah, that's just right for you, isn't it? It would be trouble if you boarded a fully packed train, wouldn't it?"

"Rather..... we moved to a place near the school. So I could attend that school."

"..... eh?"

For an instant, I didn't get what Koigasaki was saying.

"When it was decided I would go to this school, I was originally supposed to commute to school by train from my previous house, but my Dad was really worried about it. I'd been going to middle school on foot, so there's no way I could ride a fully packed train, my Dad said. Thus, the conclusion was we ought to move to a place within walking distance to school again."

"Wha.....!?"

Isn't her father being over-protective?

Rather, having the luxury to move just like that for such a small reason, don't tell me Koigasaki's family is really rich?

Even though she has the appearance of a **Gyaru**, she's really a rich man's kid?

"Ah, which reminds me."

As if she just remembered something, Koigasaki spoke abruptly.

"Since you're hopelessly no good both on the inside and the outside, which really sucks, please at least do something about your looks before hanging out with the rest. Just walking next to you makes it embarrassing."

"S-Shut up....."

Having lost the will, I could only retort with that.

"With your little money, go buy some hair-styling wax and a pair of scissors used for trimming eyebrows. The drugstores sell them. And also, make sure you invite Suzuki tomorrow."

While talking about those things, I reached my station and got off.

I obediently took Koigasaki's advice, went to the local drugstore on my way home and bought my hair-styling wax and eyebrow trimming scissors.

The following day, I woke up fifteen minutes earlier than usual, stood in front of the mirror, and fought with the wax that I bought.

I was pissed and mortified by what Koigasaki said the day before, and I felt like dressing up better to make her change her opinion of me. However, things didn't go as well as I would like, and in the end, the result turned out half-assed and I gave up.

I wore my uniform in my usual way; on my way out, I took a look at the mirror before the entrance and got flustered when I remembered Koigasaki's cautionary notes on how I should wear my uniform.

Unbutton my first button and loosen up my tie.

"Uwah....."

I turned towards the voice from behind and saw my little sister, Akari, who was about to leave the house, looking at me with a mocking smile.

"What's this, Naoki? Someone like you turning up his sex appeal!? Disgusting!"

"Shut up! It's not like I'm..... I'm leaving!"

I became embarrassed and left the house for school before Akari.

"Oh, Kashiwada, what's up with your head?"

Right after I reached my seat in the classroom, Kiritani queried me with a look that said he was trying to hold back his laughter.

"This is the first time I've tried to use hair wax, but it's not standing well at all....."

"Hahah..... you've finally awaken to becoming more stylish, huh. That itself is an improvement, right?"

Kiritani, who had both his hair and eyebrows in perfect form as usual, praised me from a position of superiority.

"Ah, which reminds me, Kiritani. You want to go to karaoke? The people coming are....."

On remembering my mission, I tried inviting Kiritani to the karaoke.

"Going to karaoke with Hasegawa and Koigasaki!? What kind of group is this? I've been meaning to ask this for quite some time now, but what kind of relationship do you have with Koigasaki!?"

I was troubled how to answer that. Koigasaki couldn't deal well with guys, and I was the only one she could talk to normally, so she was using me in order to get closer to Suzuki. I would feel relieved if I told him this truth, but Koigasaki didn't seem to want her classmates to know she couldn't deal well with guys. Consequently, I kept mum about it.

"Don't tell me you guys are really close?"

"No way, it's not like that we're really close..... well, erm, how should I put it..... it's because of a certain incident that we managed to start talking to each other."

"To think that Koigasaki who's cold towards all the same year guys acts familiarly only towards Kashiwada... ..."

"No, she's not familiar with me or anything. She's also cold towards me, you know!?"

I said desperately for the sake of both our reputations.

"Rather, that doesn't matter, right! How about it, you'll be coming, right!?"

Uhm, Kiritani let out a small groan,

"Indeed, it's tempting with these two beauties coming along, but..... sorry, I can't go."

He said in a tone full of regret.

"Eeh? Seriously, why? Are you busy?"

"Nah, it's just that my girlfriend's pretty restrictive. If she finds out that I went to hang out with other girls, she will cry and blow up at me....."

Restrictive, meaning she's the clingy type? I wondered for an instant before my brain caught up with the words that came before.

"Girl, friend.....? Kiritani, you..... have a girlfriend.....?"

"Eh, I didn't tell you?"

"I never heard anything about it!"

I trembled in indignation at the traitor before me.

"That so ~? My bad, my bad."

After that, Kiritani showed me the sticker photo he and his girlfriend took while they dated in middle school (even though I never asked for it), and started filling me in with the details of their dating days, leading me to sink deeper and deeper into despair.

During recess, I went to Suzuki's class B. When I peered into the classroom from the corridor, I saw two other guys gathered at Suzuki's desk and the three of them were talking.

It seemed difficult to call out to him and as I was hesitating on what to do, miraculously, Suzuki turned in my direction and noticed me. He immediately stood up and came up to me.

"Kasshii, what's up?"

"Ah, sorry..... it looks like I'm interrupting....."

"Eeh, don't worry about that!"

This guy is really a great guy.....

"Erm, Suzuki, are you up for karaoke? With a group of six guys and girls though."

"Six guys and girls?"

"Yeah, the guys haven't been decided yet, but for now, the girls will be Hasegawa, Koigasaki, and probably Sasagawa from my class....."

"Heyh, I don't know any of them."

I was surprised at Suzuki's words. Both Hasegawa and Koigasaki weren't just famous for their cuteness in my class, but also known and discussed about among all the guys in our school year..... That's what I'd heard from Kiritani previously, so I thought he'd at least know their names.

"Kasshii, are you going?"

"Yeah, that's a given....."

"Then maybe I'll go, too."

"Eh..... eeh!?"

"Weren't we talking about going to an **Ani-song** karaoke the other day?"

Suzuki said with sparkling eyes.

"Ah, that's right. But this time, there will be a number of normal people coming along, so **Ani-songs** might be difficult....."

If I were to sing an **Ani-song**, my **Otaku** secret would definitely get found out. I had to avoid that at all costs.

"If you're coming, then we just need one more guy. I guess it's better to have an equal number of guys and girls....."

"Ah, really? Then, can I just invite a random friend? There's someone who seems to be into this sort of thing."

While saying that, Suzuki looked into the classroom. Perhaps he was looking at one of the guys he was talking to at his seat. A **Riajuu** like that might be able to liven things up and I would be grateful for that.

"Really? Then I'll leave it to you!"

At that moment, the bell rang and I parted with Suzuki and returned to my classroom. With this, the participants had been decided.

After school that day, I wanted to tell Koigasaki that Suzuki was officially coming to karaoke, but she seemed to have already left, so I couldn't let her know.

Kiritani said he was dropping by the CD rental shop near the station on his way home, and I accompanied him.

"I have to borrow Kana-yan's new album."

Said Kiritani while he was taking hold of the new release of a female artist.

There weren't any CDs I wanted to listen to in particular, and more importantly, I had to set aside some money for buying the clothes I needed for the upcoming karaoke session, so I didn't plan to loan out anything.

But, I remembered something important.

"T..... there aren't any songs I can sing at karaoke....."

Normally, since I listened only to **Ani-songs**, songs by voice actresses, or vocaloids, I knew nothing about any of the latest J-Pop songs.

"We are having a promotional offer today. Five CDs for just a thousand yen."

The store assistant's words gave me a start.

"All right! Today, I shall loan five CDs of songs that I can sing at karaoke without looking like a weirdo!"

"You are going this far for a simple karaoke session? How motivated can you get?"

Kiritani laughed while mocking me.

"Hey, what songs can a high school guy sing without appearing weird these days!? If possible, something well received by girls!"

I was desperate enough to ask that despite knowing it would make me look like an ignorant nerd.

"Aah, I see, you're motivated because Hasegawa's going..... uuhn, I don't really know, but let's see... Band songs should be a safe bet, right? And as for those that are well received by girls....."

I loaned out five of the latest albums by a few rising artists critically selected by Kiritani. While this was an unexpected expense, it was a necessary investment, so it couldn't be helped.

"Jeez, I still have to buy clothes. Seriously, I'm really short....."

"Clothes? You mean for the karaoke? You're getting new clothes just for that?"

I took the chance to ask Kiritani about where I should buy my clothes.

"Well, I usually buy secondhand from Harajuku and the like. It will be terrible if you mess up choosing the right outfits from secondhand clothes stores, though, and you seem like someone who'd mess up..... well, you can also do this, go get a magazine and if there's something that catches your eye, go to the store that sells it and buy the whole set."

After that, I parted ways with Kiritani and took the train back, dropped by a local bookstore on my way home, took Kiritani's advice and headed to the men's fashion magazines corner.

I had never browsed through, nor read, any kind of fashion magazines, so I had no idea which magazine to buy. I should have asked Kiritani to recommend me something.....

Among the lined up magazines, my eyes stopped at a conspicuous one.

I was drawn to the male model on the cover, dressed in flashy, host-like fashion, and I took a look at the contents inside.

"Believe in the black soul! Shine more elegantly!"

"This is me-style, Bad Boy aesthetics."

"It was Gaia who drove me so mad, you know?"

Accompanying the impact-loaded catchphrases, the host-like, glitzy guys were striking poses.

As I looked through the magazine, I found the featured clothing to be very cool. Because words like *"Wearing this will make you popular with girls"* were written all over, I truly felt that it was really the case, and thus, I bought the magazine, and decided to go to the brand store featured in the magazine.

Looking it up on my cellphone, I found out that the brand store was in a fashion building known as "108-2" in Shibuya. I decided I would head there after school tomorrow without further delay.

After school the next day, I was full of enthusiasm going to Shibuya on my way home. Since Koigasaki was still around, I called out to her.

"Yoh, Suzuki will be coming to karaoke."

"Really!? Well done! Aah jeez, I was too excited yesterday and ended up going to the beauty salon after school to re-dye my hair ~"

Koigasaki proudly brushed through her long hair.

"Eh, I don't notice any difference."

"That's why you are hopeless....."

Rather, this girl was more motivated than me.

"Why don't you do something about your hair, too? Such as going to a beauty salon."

"I don't have the money to go to a beauty salon....."

I somehow managed to cough up money to buy some new clothes using my New Year's gift money, but it wasn't enough to also pay a visit to a beauty salon.

"Well, at least for now, I've applied wax to my hair....."

"Are you kidding me!? There isn't any difference, though!?"

Koigasaki's merciless words struck me hard.

"Well, just wait and see. After all, I just bought a fashion magazine yesterday! Right now, I'm going to buy the clothes I saw featured in it!"

"Fuhn..... why are you acting so smug just from buying a magazine..... Well, whatever, at least it'll be better than those old man's clothes of yours."

They can't compare to the clothes I have now. The clothes I'm buying today are the type super popular guys in Shibuya wear.

"Momo ~ what are you doing ~? Hurry ~!"

As we talked until there, Koigasaki was called by several girls and we parted ways.

I headed to Shibuya with a tinge of nervousness.

This was of course the first time I'd been to Shibuya. The uneasy thought of not knowing what to do if I lost my way crossed my mind.

I transferred to the Yamanote Line and arrived at Shibuya station. For the first in my life, I stood on Shibuya ground. Even though it was a weekday, there were tons of people. Many of them were stylish youngsters, which made me feel a tad intimidated.

I arrived at my destination, the building known as '108 -2', entered the store featured in the magazine to look at the clothes, and immediately, a store assistant came up to me. Even the store assistant was dressed in host-like clothes.

"This here is our latest merchandise."

"Ah, i-is that so?"

Though I felt a little intimidated by the assistant's present-day flippant manner of speech, I knew it wasn't the time for that. Because today, no matter what, I definitely had to get my 'victory' clothes that I'd wear to karaoke.

"Would you like to give this a try?"

"Ah, well then....."

Doing as the store assistant told me, I ended up trying the shirt.

I looked at the mirror reflecting my figure in the fitting room, but it was hard for me to tell whether I looked good in that shirt or not.

"Sir, that shirt really suits you ~!"

The host-like store assistant complimented me exaggeratedly and I felt inclined to think that maybe it was really much better than I thought.

"Then, I'll have this.....

"Thank you very much! Would you like a pair of matching pants?"

"Ah, then..... What will be good.....?"

Since I'm already here, I might as well buy the whole set. Besides, the upper and lower wear from the same store will be easier to match.

On the store assistant's recommendation, I bought my pants, and even a new pair of shoes, and thus my shopping day ended more smoothly than I thought possible.

When I returned home, I tried out the shirt, jacket, and pants that I bought.

"Uhn, I get the feeling that they look a lot better than when I saw them at the store.....!"

Looking at myself in my new outfit in the mirror, I persuaded myself. Though partially, it was also because, since I had already bought them, I wanted to convince myself that it was so.

Chapter 6

It wasn't the time for me to worry about tests, so I took care of my midterms without studying too much, and the long awaited day came.

On the day of the karaoke session.

We had arranged to meet at 1 PM in front of Ikebukuro station.

"Since you're the organizer, you should pick the meeting place, at least", Koigasaki had told me, and after deliberating for a long time, I thought that a place I'm familiar with should be fine, so I decided on Ikebukuro, where I used to hang out with my middle school **Otaku** friends when we went to **Otaku** shops.

I woke up an hour before it was time to leave the house, washed my face, ate my breakfast, brushed my teeth, shaved, and wore the 'victory outfit' that I had bought the other day.

And, as I was struggling with my hair wax in front of the bathroom mirror,

"Naoki, what's with that host-like outfit ~! And how long are you going to stand in front of the mirror? You're in the way and gross to top it off!"

I answered my little sister, who was hurling abuses from behind,

"Shut up! If you want to brush your teeth, go do it at the kitchen sink. I'm at war here."

But my protest was ineffective and my little sister, Akari, thrust me aside and started brushing her teeth.

At that moment, my Mom spoke.

"Naoki..... you've been styling your hair recently. Don't tell me you got yourself a girlfriend?"

"There's no way that would happen! There's no way this creepy **Otaku** Naoki could get a girlfriend!"

..... little sis, you're an **Otaku** too.

"No, I didn't..... But today, I'll be going to karaoke with some girls from my class."

"Eehh?? Naoki..... that's great to hear, isn't it? I'd been worried if you could even manage to talk to girls in real life..... and to think there are girls willing to go to karaoke with you....."

I didn't really know if she was worried or just mocking me.

Akari made a shocked expression,

"Aren't those girls a figment of your imagination?"

"They're real!"

"They must look like gorillas....."

"Finding girls like that would be rather difficult, actually! They are normal, cute girls!"

After hearing my words, for some reason, Akari turned red in the face and yelled angrily.

"That pissed me off! Who do you think you are!? It's just going to karaoke with girls in your class! What're you getting so worked up for! Creepy!"

While saying that, she gave me a kick on the leg.

"Ouch! What's the matter with you all of a sudden? It's none of your business anyway..... Crap! It's this late already! I'm leaving!"

Time flew while I engaged in wasted chatter with my family and it was time to leave. I just had to make do with my hair as it was. Since I was the organizer, I couldn't afford to be late.

"Good luck..... Hey, Naoki, are you going in those clothes?"

"Erh, yeah....."

"I see, those clothes..... erm, forget it, it would be overprotective of me if I meddle with your fashion choices, and besides, it'll be troubling if you get a mother complex."

"H-Huuh!? I'm out of time, got to go!"

While I was kind of bothered by the meaning behind Mom's words, I didn't have the time to give it further thought and left the house at that.

I headed towards the appointed meeting place, at the Ikefukurou statue[30] at the east exit of Ikebukuro station.

Because of all my rushing, I arrived earlier than expected, ten minutes before the meeting time.

"Sorry for the wait, huh.....?"

While Koigasaki was already at the meeting place, she appeared to be talking to a guy I didn't know.

The only guy among today's members whom I didn't know would be Suzuki's friend, but the guy talking to Koigasaki didn't look like a high school student.

"Meh, so you're already meeting another guy."

The guy said after seeing me and he left. Koigasaki was frozen stiff.

At that moment, I finally understood.

"That guy was hitting on you.....!?"

"You're slow to only realize it now! Aah ~ what's up with that guy! Even though I was ignoring him, he just went on and on....."

I casually looked at Koigasaki's outfit while she grumbled to me.

Her outfit gave me an impression different from the last time I met up with her. She was wearing a pink dress

with floral patterns and a thick belt. A can-can hat[31] covered her head, and her make-up and twirls were even a notch above her usual self.

"Hey, what's up with those clothes!?"

Koigasaki's grumbles stopped abruptly and she grabbed hold of the hem of my shirt.

"Eh, I bought a magazine and bought this set at a store featured in the magazine. It cost me a bomb ~"

"Unbelievable!"

"..... eh?"

I doubted my ears when I heard Koigasaki's unexpected words.

"Why the Big Bro style!?"

"Eh? What's wrong, doesn't this look cool!?"

"You know, different clothes suit different people, right? Your plain face and unstyled hair aren't a match for your clothes..... and on top of that! Of all things, pointed shoes!? You are a wreck!"

Koigasaki sighed out in exasperation. The pointed shoes she mentioned had to be referring to the shoes with pointed toes that I was wearing.

"And furthermore, you're aiming for Hasegawa-san, right!? Why are you wearing those clothes when you're aiming for a clean, neat type like her!? Most girls like her hate the **Gyaru-Oh**[32] type, you know!?"

"Eh..... s-se-seriously....."

I sunk into the depths of despair.

I thought that anything I picked according to a fashion magazine would be okay.....

At that moment, Koigasaki's cell rang.

"Ah, hello? Miki, where are you? Ah, all right, got it."

And she hung up.

"I forgot to mention this to you, but there's one more girl coming today."

Said Koigasaki with an apologetic face.

"Eh, heehh?"

I'd received so much shock already that I could only make a nonchalant reply.

"When I invited Miki, Mizuki..... ah, it's Amemiya Mizuki. The same class as us. Mizuki heard us, and she begged to come along when she heard that Suzuki-kun is coming."

Koigasaki said with a depressed face. It was understandable, since that was one more rival for her. Koigasaki's chances of talking to Suzuki might be getting slimmer and slimmer.

"Sorry to keep you guys waiting."

At that moment, Suzuki and his **Riajuu** friend appeared at the meeting place.

"Oh, it's Suzuki."

Koigasaki's expression clearly changed when she saw Suzuki.

"Ah, this is my classmate, Hirose."

"Heyas!"

Suzuki introduced his friend to us. The Hirose guy had brown-dyed hair and wore stylish clothing. Just from his appearance, I could sense that he was a frivolous guy.

"This is my friend from class A, Kasshii. His family name is Kashiwada."

Suzuki went on to introduce me to Hirose, but that frivolous guy Hirose clearly held no interest in me.

"And, how about....."

He asked Suzuki about Koigasaki, and I frantically introduced Koigasaki.

"Ah, this is Koigasaki.....-san from my class."

"..... nice to meet you....."

Before the Suzuki she admired, Koigasaki greeted in a surprisingly soft, timid voice.

Who the heck are you? At the very least, you aren't the Koigasaki I know.

"I've heard about you ~! Koigasaki-san, you are a really famous person! Nice to meet you, too ~!"

That frivolous friend of Suzuki..... Hirose, even though they were meeting for the first time, he spoke to Koigasaki in a familiar manner and took her hand and forcibly shook it.

Koigasaki had a drawn look on her face. Will she be okay? I got a little worried.....

"Ah, Hasegawa.....-san....."

Hasegawa suddenly appeared in my field of vision.

She had her beautiful, black hair tied up nicely to one side.

She had a white frilly blouse beneath a beige cardigan, wrapped in a turquoise shawl, and wore a knee-length flared skirt.

Seeing Hasegawa in her simple yet neat and clean casual wear, I was lost in admiration.

"Ah, t-this is Hasegawa-san from my class."

I introduced Hasegawa to Suzuki and Hirose, and they greeted Hasegawa. Hirose spoke in a familiar way to Hasegawa and forcibly shook her hand, too. It seemed he was the kind who flirts with any girl he meets, true to his appearance.

"Kasshii, how many more?"

"A-ahh, there are two more girls....."

I turned my eyes to my watch; it was five minutes past the appointed time.

"Sorry, sorry ~!"

Turning towards the voice, I saw two **Gyaru**s, Koigasaki's friends, Sasagawa Miki and Amemiya Mizuki, heading towards here.

Once again, to me, they were **Gyaru**s with an even flashier appearance than Koigasaki. Sasagawa had brown hair that was approaching blond, and wore a tailored jacket as her overcoat and a 'torn' pair of jeans. Rather than saying she looked a little boyish, her casual wear gave off more of a delinquent feel.

On the other hand, Amemiya Mizuki was dressed in a trench-coat and a pink miniskirt, with her legs covered in fishnet tights. For a female high school student, rather than sexy, she had a glitzy look in her casual wear.

Hasegawa's neat and clean casual outfit was far too different, and looked out of place among the girls. Without a doubt, among the four girls, including Koigasaki, I felt that Hasegawa's outfit was the most charming.

With all the members assembled, we ascended the stairs to exit the underground station.

"What should we do now ~?"

Hirose asked, and I frantically replied,

"Ah, I was thinking we should make our way to the karaoke....."

"Karaoke right off the bat? Since many of us are meeting for the first time, don't you guys want to go some place and talk?"

Said Sasagawa Miki.

"Ah, I want to talk ~. We haven't even introduced ourselves yet ~"

Amemiya Mizuki chirped in agreement.

I hadn't thought about that.....

Taking Hirose's suggestion, we ended up going to a family restaurant.

While we were making our way from the station to the family restaurant, the guys and girls started talking among their own gender groups. Throwing a glance at the girls, I saw Koigasaki talking to Hasegawa. In her own way, it seemed like she was considerate not to let Hasegawa feel left out. I changed my impression of Koigasaki a little.

After reaching the family restaurant, everyone ordered drinks, and the girls also ordered dessert. Hirose took charge of the orders. Everyone had probably forgotten that I was the organizer. But, since it was impossible for me to take absolute charge, I was sincerely grateful to Hirose. Each and every one then took their drink from the beverage bar and returned to their seats.

"Well, shall we do self-introductions? Tell your class, name, and hobbies and stuff ~ Let's start from the girls ~! "

The self introductions started with Hirose's prompting.

From the left, Amemiya Mizuki led off.

"Eh ~ Starting from me ~? Erhm ~, I'm Amemiya Mizuki from class A. I've been really looking forward to today ~ Nice to meet you ~."

I 'd never talked to Amemiya Mizuki in class despite being classmates, though I was somehow conscious of her existence.

She wears thick make-up and has a high-pitched voice. Likes guys. A typical modern **Gyaru**. That was the impression I had.

"I'm next. I'm Sasagawa Miki from class A. I'm good friends with Momo and Mizuki. Nice to meet you!"

Sasagawa Miki greeted energetically. Even though she was a **Gyaru**, she felt like someone who belonged to an athletic group. She had the brightest-colored hair among the others.

Next would be Koigasaki's turn, since she was sitting beside Sasagawa.

"All right, it's Momo's turn."

"Ah..... erm..... I-I'm Koigasaki Momo..... from class A ..... nice to meet you....."

She almost swallowed back her words in the middle but somehow managed. Just looking at her was enough to make me fume. No, I don't have the time to be worried about others.....

Hasegawa's self-introduction was just like on the first day of school, a simple, concise self-introduction that ended promptly.

Following that, it was the guys' turn. Suzuki did it without a hitch; Hirose finished it with practiced ease; while feeling nervous, I too did mine, somehow.

After our orders arrived, idle chatter started.

Initially, Hirose started a topic with the girls, and the girls..... actually, Sasagawa Miki and Amemiya Mizuki, kept him engaged.

Obviously, I couldn't participate in their conversation, so I kept quiet and listened. What an uncomfortable

moment. Meanwhile, Amemiya Mizuki started talking to Suzuki, and Sasagawa Miki also joined in. When I looked in Hasegawa's direction..... Hirose, who was sitting in front of her, had started chatting her up. Gosh. Don't tell me that Hirose is actually aiming for Hasegawa?

I turned to take a look at Koigasaki, who was sitting in the corner opposite from me. She seemed to be getting anxious as Amemiya talked more and more to Suzuki. But, apparently unable to participate, she merely kept quiet. However, this wasn't the time for me to worry about others. I too couldn't join in any of the conversations. I just realized this, but in this group, the only people who were left out were Koigasaki and me.

While we stayed in the family restaurant for only about an hour, it felt painfully like an eternity to me.

After a while, once again, on Hirose's cue, we moved to the karaoke venue.

Because of what happened at the family restaurant, quite frankly, at this point, I felt really depressed.

I had to regain my honor at the karaoke. It was for this day that I had been listening to and practicing the J-Pop songs which I normally didn't listen.

Walking for a short while after leaving the family restaurant, we reached the karaoke box.

The karaoke was rather packed on a Sunday, and we were made to wait for about ten minutes.

"Kasshii, what kind of songs have you been into lately? "

While waiting, Suzuki asked casually.

I hadn't talked to anyone much, so I felt saved by his question.

This was the time I'd been waiting for, and I started naming the popular J-Pop artists whose songs I'd been dutifully studying.

"Seriously? I don't know any of them."

After talking to Suzuki for a bit, Amemiya Mizuki started talking to Suzuki in the midst of our conversation and I ended up getting left out of the talk again.

Then, my name was called and we were led to a room.

Leading the way was Amemiya Mizuki who started with the song of a popular K-Pop girls' group.

We then took turns entering our songs. I was planning to enter the one song I was most confident with from among those I had practiced, but.....

"Ah, Hirose, you entered this song!? This is really good , right!"

"Miki-chan, you like this song, too?"

Hirose had entered it before me.....

Left without a choice, I entered my next best song, by a rock band.

"Eh, Kashiwada, you're singing this!? It's really unexpected!"

"Eh, y-yeah....."

When the display showed the title of the song I planned to sing, Sasagawa Miki talked to me for the first time. Though I was taken aback, I was a little delighted. But.

"I also like this song, but I'm really surprised that Kashiwada likes it, too! I thought you were going to sing **Ani-songs** or the like."

"Yeah, yeah, I also thought so!"

Sasagawa said while laughing. Hirose too chirped in agreement.

They were totally mocking me. More like, despite trying to hide this, do I look that much like an **Otaku**.....

At this point, my HP was approaching zero.

"Momo, what are you singing ~? Why don't you sing AKB! You always get the song and choreography down perfectly, don't you?"

Sasagawa passed the song selector remote to Koigasaki and prompted her to make her selection.

"Erh, today, I'm not singing..... erm, my throat's not well."

"Eh!? Don't say that ~! I really want to hear Koigasaki-chan sing AKB!"

Hirose stood up and made himself comfortable next to Koigasaki.

Koigasaki kept quiet and turned her head to the side.

"Hey, hey, talking about AKB, does anyone here like a band member in particular!?"

Amemiya Mizuki asked immediately after finishing her K-Pop song.

Hirose answered right away. Amemiya and Sasagawa reacted.

"How about Suzuki-kun?"

Asked Amemiya,

"AKB..... I'm not really interested, but if you ask me....."

Suzuki spoke the name of the youngest and most innocent-looking member of AKB.

At that moment, I had decided on my answer.

While I wasn't specially a fan of AKB and wasn't too informed about them, if I had to name a favourite member, only one of them was my type. I prepared myself to say her name when my turn came. However.

"Suzuki-kun, so you like the innocent kind!? I'm a little surprised ~!"

"By the way, the poll results will be out in June, won't they? I'm curious who will claim the most plain-looking category."

"Well, I actually bought the CD and voted!"

"Eh, seriously!? Hahaha! Aren't you really hardcore!"

With that, Amemiya, Sasagawa and Hirose kept talking about AKB.

My turn never came.....

My heart completely snapped.

"Huh? Who's next ~? I don't know this song."

Said Amemiya Mizuki as the guitar intro of the upcoming song resounded in the box.

I doubted my ears. It was a song I liked..... a popular **Vocaloid** song. For a moment, I was worried that I might have entered the song out of habit, but I didn't remember doing that.

"Ah, it's mine ~"

Suzuki stood up.

This guy..... what a hero..... even if he had no intention of hiding the fact he was an **Otaku**, to think he would pick a song that was popular among **Otakus** in this **Riajuu**-filled place.....

Even though it was someone else's business, I ended up feeling nervous.

Before long, the intro finished and Suzuki started singing.

This was the first time I'd heard Suzuki sing; I was surprised by how good he was. With a beautiful voice, at an octave lower, he perfectly finished singing this song that crossed into the realm of a female's high pitch.

"Eh, Suzuki-kun, you're really good ~! It was awesome !? Oh my, that was really cool ~!"

Amemiya Mizuki was full of praise.

Everyone was taken aback by Suzuki's singing.

I casually turned my eyes to Koigasaki.....

With a spellbound look, her stiffened-up body appeared to be completely motionless. Her eyes didn't leave Suzuki for a second, and even her eyeballs seemed fixed in place.

"I'm really amazed ~! Eh, whose song is this!? It's really unexpectedly good ~!"

Not long after Suzuki finished, Amemiya moved closer to Suzuki.

"I've never heard it either. Since Souta plays the guitar, he must know the less prominent songs as well, right?"

Hirose nodded to himself.

No one had realized this was a **Vocaloid** song that was popular among **Otakus**.

"Erm, how do I explain it? It's a song from an animation site, written by an amateur....."

Not knowing how to explain it to normal people who were ignorant of **Vocaloids**, Suzuki looked troubled.

"Ah, could it be it's a song from an independent band that hasn't made any major debut yet!?"

"Wow, Suzuki-kun, you aren't only in the light music club but really knowledgeable about music ~!"

Completely off track, Sasagawa and Amemiya were impressed.

"Ah, Kasshii, you know this song, right!?"

Suzuki became cheerful and threw the ball to my court .

"Ah, aah..... well....."

Of course, I wanted to tell Suzuki that I knew and loved that song, but I wasn't sure it it was a good idea to answer him in front of the rest, so I became evasive.

Before long, the intro of the song I entered started playing and Suzuki handed the mike to me.

While I sang the song that I'd practiced like crazy, the others were still clamoring Suzuki about the song he sang. No one was listening to me.

After I was done, the intro of AKB's latest song started playing.

"Eh..... this song; why..... I didn't enter it....."

Koigasaki was surprised hearing the intro.

"Momo, I've been waiting for you to enter this song that you sang the other day and since you didn't, I did it for you! Now, stand up! Make sure you do the dance, too , all right!?"

Sasagawa urged Koigasaki to stand up.

Hirose got excited and started clapping.

Koigasaki stood up with a rigid expression, and just when I thought she was going to pick up the mike, she took the remote and pointed it to the screen. The words ' song terminated' then appeared on the screen.

"Ehh, hey Momo, why did you delete it!?"

"Ah, oh no, I accidentally deleted it by mistake! Sorry for wasting your effort."

While saying that, she flashed a smile at Sasagawa.

"Seriously, what are you doing."

Sasagawa returned with a wry smile.

"Then, make sure you sing the next one, okay?"

Hirose added with a tone of regret.

The next song started and Hirose, who had entered the song, took hold of the mike.

"I need to go the ladies for a bit."

Koigasaki told Sasagawa and with that, started leaving the box.

"Momo, what's up with you today....."

Sasagawa looked at her intently with worried eyes.

"Uhn, she might just be having a stomachache, right? Her face is pretty pale ~"

Without a hint of concern, Amemiya became absorbed in selecting her song.

Koigasaki wasn't her normal self. Which reminds me, all this while, didn't she have a really rigid look on her face with Hirose sitting beside her? Even I got concerned about her well-being.

"I'm also going to the gents....." I said to Sasagawa who sat beside me and exited the box.

Facing the toilet, I saw Koigasaki squatting in front of the ladies.

"Hey, what's wrong....."

"Eh, why are you....."

Koigasaki noticed me and her face turned to one of amazement.

"Are you all right?"

While Koigasaki wasn't in tears or anything, her face was as white as a sheet.

"T-There's no way..... I would be all right..... that Hirose guy sat right next to me and tried to speak to me familiarly, and I didn't get to talk to Suzuki-kun....."

Koigasaki started venting out her displeasure.

"I mean! How can that guy rub shoulders with me when it's only our first meeting! He's too close! I can't take it anymore! I've had enough of him!"

Koigasaki hugged her own shoulders and trembled.

"Frivolous guys like him are the most difficult to handle for me!"

I never realized Koigasaki was pretty much at her limits.

I was so absorbed in my own affairs that I hadn't realized Hirose had been sitting right beside Koigasaki, and been physically plastering to her.

When I thought about it, I hadn't really heard much of her voice all day. She didn't really speak much (which was true for me, too).

I was the only one who knew about Koigasaki's dislike for guys. To top it off, I was the organizer. I had to be more considerate of her.

"Speaking of which, I didn't have the time to concern myself with you, but how did you do? Did you manage to talk to Hasegawa-san?"

Even though she was in pretty bad shape herself, Koigasaki still asked about me.

Somehow, I started to find her admirable.

"Hasegawa..... Ha..... Hasegawa!?"

And then, I remembered the person for whom I carried a torch. Unbelievable, I had forgotten about the existence of Hasegawa.

Hasegawa also didn't seem to have spoken much today. She must have felt really uncomfortable, I supposed.

Even though I was the one who extended the invitation, I never really showed any consideration for her. I was a failure as the organizer.

I couldn't join any of the conversations, got mocked despite my efforts, and didn't even manage to notice there were people having a hard time or being left out.

"I'm no good....."

I unconsciously murmured.

"Huuh? What's with that..... if you say that, I'm no good either. Even Miki was concerned about me....."

Koigasaki sighed and became crestfallen.

After we grumbled for a while, we returned to the box which we didn't want to return to. Since it would be suspicious for us to go back at the same time, we returned separately with some time in-between.

"Ah, Kasshii. We only have 5 minutes left."

I felt relieved just hearing that from Suzuki upon my return.

Since I'd been hoping for this gloomy time to end quickly.

After the last person, Sasagawa, finished her song, I took the payment voucher and we exited the box.

I paid up at the cashier, divided the total sum among the number of people, and received the money from the rest.

"Huh, it's a little late, but ~ could it be that today's organizer is Kashiwada?"

Amemiya asked as I handed her the change from the cashier.

This was the first time I talked to Amemiya.

I shrank back as I acknowledged with a yes.

"Eeh ~ isn't it pretty meaningless for you to be the organizer? That's really funny, though."

She said to me.

What she meant was, it was meaningless for a lame, plain guy like me to be the organizer, and she found it funny.

While I'd never been able to deal with **Gyaru**s, after today, it became even worse.

I would never become the organizer again, I swore to myself.

As we were heading to the station from the karaoke, I decided to go for a last stretch of effort and called out to Hasegawa.

Hasegawa was trailing quietly at the end of the group with her usual expressionless face.

"You know, Hasegawa-san....."

Hasegawa turned slightly to face me after hearing my words.

"I'm, sorry..... for today."

When I was right before Hasegawa, I panicked and couldn't say anything else.

I thought it might be better for me to explain why I was apologizing, but I didn't know how.

"..... why are you apologizing?"

Hasegawa asked, while maintaining her expressionless face.

I wavered and a number of words came to my mind, but, not knowing what I should say, without saying anything, the distance to the station kept melting away.

Just before we reached the station, thinking that I had to say something,

"Ah, but, thanks for coming today!"

I blurted out.

The thought of how troubled Hasegawa might be after hearing my sudden thanks without even explaining why I had apologized made me regret what I had said.

Hasegawa didn't say anything to me.

But..... just very faintly, a smile formed..... at the corner of her lips.

Hasegawa smiled. I could have thought it was just my imagination, but that Hasegawa smiled at me.

Since my first day of school, this was the first time I'd seen Hasegawa smile again.

I was jubilant.

Before I knew it, we reached the station; Hirose, Sasagawa and Amemiya seemed to be exchanging their contacts.

Either via QR code scans or IR beaming. Then, Amemiya and Hirose asked Suzuki and Koigasaki for their contacts, respectively.

I also wanted to ask Hasegawa for her contact info, but of course, I didn't have the courage for that.

Afterwards, Hirose said some closing words (Hirose was already pretty much the organizer), and we parted ways.

Riding the train alone, listening to a **Nico Nico Douga** vocalist I liked in my favorites on my iPod, I thought back.

All this while, I'd been listening to J-Pop in preparation for today's karaoke, and it had been a while since I'd listened to songs that I liked.

Many unpleasant things happened today.

I got to learn that it was absolutely impossible for me to become a **Riajuu**.

And I thought of giving up.

However, I was able to see Hasegawa's smile in the end.

Just that alone made me happy. I should work even harder. I had no time to be depressed about my pathetic self.

From tomorrow onward, I would work harder to become a cool **Riajuu** and get even closer to Hasegawa, I swore to myself.

Chapter 7

A week had passed since we went to karaoke. I hadn't exchanged a single word with Hasegawa since then.

"Thanks for the other day. Can I ask you to hang out with us again?", I had wanted to say to her many times, however, it was just extraordinary difficult to talk to Hasegawa at school, so it was out of the question for me.

Like me, Koigasaki too seemed like she wasn't able to hook up with Suzuki since the karaoke session.

We were hoping that by hanging out together once, the distance between us and our targets of affection would have shrunk, but reality was not so simple.

Before I knew it, almost two months had passed since school started.

Soon, we would switch to short sleeved uniforms and the rainy season would be upon us.

As usual, I struggled with my hair wax and trimmed my eyebrows, but there was no improvement whatsoever.

On that night, I made a strong decision.

I thought of a number of things. I was overflowing with motivation after the karaoke session and was seriously considering how I could raise the level of my visual appeal.

Observing the guys in my class, I noticed something.

Most of the stylish, good-looking guys had their hair dyed.

While there were some black-haired guys who were also popular, most of the flashy, stylish, conspicuous guys had brown hair.

Then, shouldn't I also go with that? I thought.

While Koigasaki got her hair dyed at the beauty salon, since I didn't have that kind of money, I bought my hair dye at a pharmacy and went to work on it in my bathroom.

After applying it on all of my hair, I waited for ten minutes. Turned on the shower and rinsed my head.

The manual actually said to leave it for fifteen to twenty minutes, but I was afraid of 'overdyeing' my hair, so I washed it off earlier.

After rinsing it thoroughly, I looked at the mirror. In it I saw the usual me with my black hair.

Strange, I thought, as I got closer to the mirror to peer at my own hair color. While there were parts that were dark brown, there were also parts that remained completely black. In short, it was effectively sparsely dyed.

And even with that, those parts that were dyed were of a brown color that was approaching black. It seemed to me that nobody would notice I had dyed my hair.

When I went to school the next day, sure enough, no one made any mention of it.

"I've dyed my hair."

I had no choice but to announce it to Kiritani.

"Eh? It's still black! Don't tell me you did it yourself?"

He struck bull's eye.

According to Kiritani, there were cases where those people who had never dyed their hair before and went for a D.I.Y kit from the pharmacy didn't manage to get their hair dyed properly.

Even while feeling depressed, I passed by the pharmacy again on my way back and looked carefully at the hair dye selections on the shelf. Perhaps I shouldn't buy the same dark brown hair dye this time. Looking at the packages carefully, I saw the depiction of a model with hair dyed a bright brown color that was approaching orange. The box had 'Bleach' written on it.

This would probably do the trick, I thought, as I headed to the cashier.

That night, I once again struggled with the hair dye agent in the bathroom. After applying the dye thoroughly, I didn't jump the gun this time. With nothing to do in the bathroom, I simply waited.

And after waiting for twenty minutes, *this should do it*, I thought, and rinsed my head in the shower. I then looked at the mirror.

"..... geh."

My hair was of a brown color that was closer to golden orange.

Whatever the case, I would never have expected such an effect.

While it might be better than not having dyed my hair at all, whether it suited me or not..... I had no idea.

"Naoki, Mama told us to use the new shampoo..... I'm leaving it here, so just take it yourself."

I heard the voice of my little sister, Akari, from the dressing room.

"Hey, wh-what, your hair color....."

I could hear Akari's voice getting closer and closer through the door. The door to the bathroom was translucent, so she seemed to have noticed something wrong with her big brother's hair.

The door swung open.

"Hey, why did you open....."

"Pffft..... gyahahahahahaha! Mama! Mama, come here!
"

Akari rolled on the floor laughing in an exaggerated manner.

"Why did you call Mom!?"

"What is it Akari..... Hyiiiiiiii -!"

Mom, who dashed over, let out a scream upon seeing her son's hair color.

"What the heck..... it's only a little too bright-looking.... .. there's no need to....."

"I..... don't remember raising up such a delinquent!!"

"Gyahahahahaha!! This is killing me!! That hair color looks really dumb!!"

Both Mom and my little sister were surprised by my hair in their own way, but there was no doubt my new hair look was getting a bad appraisal from both of them.

"Ahh, jeez, you guys are annoying!"

I frantically closed the door shut.

Is this hair color really so weird..... No, I can't take my family's word seriously. Perhaps I might get an unexpectedly good appraisal on it..... was what I wanted to think.

I mean, if I wanted to dye it back black, I would need to go buy a new hair dye agent, and since it was already close to eleven at night, the pharmacy was already closed .

The only thing I could do was first go to school in the morning, and if the people around me didn't react favorably, I would go buy my black hair dye at the pharmacy on my way back after school.

On the next day, when I entered class, I could feel the eyes of my classmates locked onto me.

The girls who were normally paid me no heed were looking at me. Perhaps I was imagining things, or perhaps they were really looking at me, and whether those looks were positive, or were just a result of me sticking out like a sore thumb, I did not know.

"Kashiwada, what happened to your head.....!"

When I reached my seat, Kiritani immediately broke out. And, at the same time, someone else was approaching my seat.

"Kashiwada, what kind of joke is this?"

It was Koigasaki. Her eyes were not smiling.

"I-Is this head no good?"

"It looks weird..... when you can't even style your hair properly with wax, it's way too early to be dyeing it."

After saying just that with a demeaning look in her eyes, Koigasaki quickly went back to her seat.

"Koigasaki talked to you again..... You guys are really on good terms, huh?"

Said Kiritani with an envious tone while staring at Koigasaki's back.

"What's with you? You already have a girlfriend, don't you? And I already said this many times, but we aren't on good terms at all."

"Will Koigasaki talk to me too if I dye my hair blond ~. ..... No, even if that can get Koigasaki to talk to me, I won't use that color."

Kiritani snickered while looking at my hair.

"Eh..... is it really that bad?"

"To be frank, it's terrible, you know? I thought you should already have noticed. Take a look at the girls."

Hearing that, I turned and looked around me and saw that the surrounding girls were giggling in my direction. So the looks that showered me when I entered the classroom were of a negative nature. I wanted to die already.

I'd merely dyed my hair, and both Koigasaki and Kiritani called my hair weird because of that; it made me want to quickly get out of school right now and dye my hair back to black immediately.

"Ah, Kasshii ~"

While feeling despondent, as I was walking along the corridor, heading to the toilet, I was stopped by a

familiar, pleasant voice. It was Suzuki. For someone with few friends like me, Suzukie was the only one who would use 'Kasshii' as my nickname.

"What an awesome color! Are you getting an image change?"

"Aah, a lot happened..... I mean, I feel this is going to be part of my dark history..... please forget what you saw today..... Ah, thanks for the other day, and sorry for being out of it that day."

I thanked and apologized to Suzuki for the other day. It would be nice if I could say that to Hasegawa.

"Nah, it was fun. But next time I want to go with just **Otaku**s, to karaoke."

Otaku karaoke..... indeed, it sounded like fun.

"By the way, this is a little sudden, but Kasshii, do you want to go to an 'Only' event for LoveMinus?"

It was such a sudden thing he brought up that my brain froze for an instant.

Then, I immediately looked around us. Luckily, there were no students passing by, and consequently, I breathed out a sigh of relief as I stroked my chest.

There was no doubt that a LoveMinus 'Only' event would involve LoveMinus **Doujin** on sale. It was a **Doujin** event where only LoveMinus **Doujin**s would be traded. While I had been to Comiket, I had never stepped foot in an 'Only' event.

"Eh? There is one?"

"Yeah, on the Sunday of the week after next. A friend of mine is participating as a **Circle**[33] and he asked me to help. I was wondering if you'd also be interested."

"I see, I didn't know that there was an 'Only' event."

My interest in the 'Only' event started to well up. I was thinking of getting myself some LoveMinus **Doujin**.

"I don't have anyone to go with me..... but it sounds fun. Let me think about it."

I then continued to talk to Suzuki for a while, and as the bell was going to ring soon, we parted for our respective classrooms.

About three meters away from the classroom, a face poked out from behind the door; a certain person threw an ultra strong glare at me.

"Hey, what were you and Suzuki talking about? I'm so envious of you!? Since the karaoke, I haven't had a single word with him....."

"Well, he was just inviting me to an 'Only' event..... wait, you won't know about it even if I told you."

"'Only' event? What's that?"

Just as Koigasaki queried me, the bell rang.

"What did Suzuki invite you to!? I'll hear the details from you later!"

After saying that, she returned to her seat.

As the closing homeroom period of the day ended, Koigasaki bode her friends goodbye, and came over to my seat.

"So, about our earlier conversation."

"Eh, well..... Suzuki asked me whether I would like to attend an 'Only' event."

"Like I was asking! What's that 'Only' event!"

I turned my head around us. There were still a few people remaining in the classroom after class.

I lowered my voice so that I wouldn't be heard by those around us, and said.

"I lent you my LoveMinus game, right? It's an event where they sell **Doujin** works of that game."

"What's **Doujin** works?"

Without even bothering to keep her voice down, Koigasaki openly uttered that word, to which I frantically replied,

"Don't say that out so loudly!"

I cautioned her. That was why clueless ordinary people were such a bother.

"Erm, it's like manga drawn by the fans of the game..... something like that."

Most of those manga are erotic; as I thought, I couldn't say that out.

"Fuhn."

Koigasaki acknowledged without much interest.

"The event is on the Sunday of the week after next, and Suzuki got roped in to help out his friend who's participating. Thus Suzuki was asking me if I would like to attend. That's all."

"Then, does it mean that if I go to that event, I'll be able to see Suzuki-kun even on a Sunday?"

Koigasaki's eyes sparkled for an instant.

"Eh, I guess....."

"Seriously!?"

Koigasaki got riled up all of a sudden.

"Is the event open to everyone!? I want to go, too!"

"Well, you can go if you want to, but I think it's better not to."

"Huuh? Why?"

"There will be a larger crowd of guys than the time in Akiba, and besides....."

What I was more worried about was the content in the **Doujin** works that would be sold there. I expected most of them would be erotic **Doujin** works. Since it's Koigasaki we're talking about, she would probably feel repulsed by the erotic **Doujin** works, and if she knew that I read those stuff, it would be a given that she would feel even more disgusted with me.

"Anyway, you can't go! In the first place, how's your progress with LoveMinus?"

"Uwu..... I'm busy with a lot of things ~"

Borrowing the game from someone, and yet she hadn't made any progress with it.

"If you aren't playing, return it to me! If you can't even appreciate the charm of LoveMinus, you aren't qualified to go to its 'Only' event!"

"How stingy..... don't forget that I've been helping you out."

I stiffened at those words. Indeed, Koigasaki not only invited Hasegawa to hang out with us, she had also helped me improve my appearance somewhat.

On top of that, if possible, I hoped that she could continue to help me.

"Hey, don't tell me you've forgotten about it!? You still owe me one, right!?"

Koigasaki's words made me sigh out as I remembered. What Koigasaki was referring to was the time when I didn't have the money to buy her a dress at Harajuku. Since she let me off without buying it for her, I certainly still owed her one.

"..... ah, I get it! I'll bring you to the 'Only' event. However, there are conditions. You must not buy any of the books there. Neither are you allowed to browse through them."

"In the first place, I'm not interested in those books, and neither do I have the money. Actually, why do I even need your permission?"

After hearing that she had no intention of buying those books, I felt a little relieved.

After this and that, it was decided that Koigasaki and I would attend the LoveMinus 'Only' event on the appointed Sunday.

I was a little apprehensive of going to the event alone, so I was hoping someone would accompany me, but there were many worrisome factors that came along with it.

For the third consecutive day, I went to the pharmacy, got my black hair dye, went home, and immediately dyed my hair back to black.

I swore silently to myself that I would never come near blond hair dye ever again.

*

The Sunday of the following week came. Koigasaki and I met up at JR's Kamata Station.

I was taken aback when Koigasaki appeared at our meeting place.

Just like the time at the karaoke, she had a frilly dress on, complete with her flawless make-up. However, on top of that, she was pulling a bright pink suitcase behind her.

"What's in that....."

"I bought costumes for LoveMinus cosplay online ~! Once I put on the costume, it'll be obvious that I'm a fan, and Suzuki might even take notice of me, right!?"

While I supposed that even without cosplaying, it would be a no-brainer to anyone that all the attendees were LoveMinus fans, her proactiveness really surprised me.

"You aren't even an **Otaku**; I'm surprised you are okay with cosplaying."

"I'm just doing it for the sake of getting close to Suzuki-kun! Anyway, these days, **Gyaru** magazines also feature cosplay fashion, and I've always wanted to try it out once ~. Besides, LoveMinus costumes are sailor uniforms, right? My middle school uniform was the blazer-type and I really adored sailor uniforms!"

While I didn't like the idea of her cosplaying LoveMinus characters with such a tainted motive, I kept quiet as I didn't want to hear a stream of complaints coming out of her.

With the help of a map, we arrived at the event's location.

"S-So many guys....."

When Koigasaki looked at the event venue, she turned pale just like the time when we went to Akihabara.

"Didn't I already tell you! It's not too late yet. Do you want to go home?"

"Huuh? What are you talking about? I'm already here! There's no way I'll turn tail now! In order to make up for last time's failure, I've decided that I'll definitely talk to Suzuki-kun today."

From here on, we would be acting separately for a while. The plan was to have me go link up with Suzuki first. Then, Koigasaki would pretend that she'd come on her own and met us by coincidence, taking the chance to talk to Suzuki. I would then help liven up the conversation by talking about LoveMinus and cosplay.

After splitting up with Koigasaki, I verified the booth number from the message sent by Suzuki and proceeded there.

"Ah, Kasshii!"

Spotting me, Suzuki smiled and waved at me. Another person, whom I supposed was Suzuki's participant friend, was sitting right next to him.

"Ah, nice to meet you. Are you Suzuki's friend?"

"Yes, we go to the same school."

After exchanging greetings with Tanaka-kun, who was Suzuki's participant friend, they invited me into the booth.

I received a copy of the **Doujin** drawn by Tanaka-kun free of charge, and feeling apologetic, I offered to help tend the booth. As such, Tanaka-kun, having some booths that he wanted to check out, took up the offer and left me and Suzuki in charge.

While tending the booth with Suzuki, I learned that Tanaka-kun was an **Otaku** friend Suzuki had met online, and as we chit-chatted for a while, I finally asked Suzuki about something which had been on my mind, before Koigasaki came.

"By the way, Suzuki, don't you have a girlfriend?"

It was something I'd wondered about all this while. Even if he was an **Otaku**, it wouldn't be strange if a hot guy like him had a girlfriend or two.

If, in the unlikely event that he already had a girlfriend , then all of Koigasaki's efforts would have gone down the drain. That was what I thought.

"Eh, why the sudden question? Kasshii, do you have one?"

"There's no way I would have one. Besides, I'm the one asking you, Suzuki."

"My girlfriend is Rinka..... Not just me, everyone here at this place either has Rinka, Manami, or Nono as his girlfriend....."

"Hey!"

It was unusual for him to sidestep my question with a joke, but I guessed it must be a topic he didn't want to discuss.

"I'm pretty serious here. I've decided that I'll only love 2D girls."

He said that calmly with his clean-cut face.

He might have said something that sounded cool, but if one were to listen to that declaration carefully, it sounded like a very regrettable thing.

"Seriously..... why would you....."

"2D girls are great. They won't betray you."

"..... what happened in the past?"

"..... uuhn..... nothing in particular, really ~"

There was a tinge of sadness in Suzuki's smiling face as he said that. Even though he said there was nothing, I suspected something really had happened to him in the past. But if the person in question was trying to dodge it, it would be difficult to pry further. It was probably something he didn't want to talk about.

At that moment, I remembered Koigasaki. If that was how Suzuki thought, then the chances of Koigasaki becoming Suzuki's girlfriend were pretty low, I supposed . Koigasaki's motivation and efforts today were not half-assed. Even though she'd kept failing and failing again all this while, it seemed that she was determined to

get closer to Suzuki today. When I remembered her determination for today, I felt that I had to at least try to do something to help her.

"Didn't we go to karaoke the other day? Didn't any of the girls there catch your eye?"

I tried asking with a thin thread of hope attached.

"Oh, karaoke, huh? That Koigasaki girl....."

I was extremely surprised when Suzuki remembered Koigasaki's name. Perhaps, there might be some hope.....

"That girl is cute, but isn't she a **Bitch**? I heard some really crazy rumors. Like she's 5-timing or prostituting herself..... seriously unbelievable."

Of all things, he had the worst kind of impression. Suzuki knew about that rumor, too.

"I hate **Bitches** the most."

Said Suzuki flatly.

I realized it then.

Two meters away from the booth where we were sitting, wearing the uniform from LoveMinus, Koigasaki stood there in a daze, with a pale face.

She seemed to have heard that.

"Ko.....!"

Koigasaki ran off as I stood up from my seat.

"Huh? Kasshii, what's wrong?"

Suzuki appeared not to have noticed Koigasaki.

"Ah, sorry, I saw someone I know..... I need to go after her!"

I left the booth to chase after Koigasaki.

By then, there was no longer any sign of Koigasaki, who had melted into the crowd.

I returned to the booth.

"Did you find her?"

"No, she's already gone."

"Really....."

"Suzuki, about what you were saying earlier."

I remembered something that I had to clear up.

"Eh?"

"About the part that Koigasaki is a **Bitch**....."

"Eh? Aah, yeah?"

"That's just a rumor! It was made up by a girl who hates Koigasaki!"

"Eh? I see."

Despite clearing it up, Suzuki appeared indifferent.

As I returned to my senses, I myself found it inexplicable that I'd been so desperately trying to cover for Koigasaki.

Well, it's not good to leave an incorrect rumor flowing through the grapevine..... it's not like I was doing it for Koigasaki..... I started making excuses to myself.

At that moment, the booth master, Tanaka-kun, came back. After saying that the event was coming to an end soon and it was about time to pack up, I bode both of them farewell.

I frantically started searching for Koigasaki again.

As I went around the booths, I still couldn't find her. I then headed toward the cosplay plaza beside the hall.

I found Koigasaki there. A participating camera-boy was in the middle of taking pictures of her.

"Erm ~, can you sit on the floor and clasp your knees ~ ?"

I frantically called out to the camera-boy, who was aiming his camera with clearly suspicious eyes.

"Ah, e-excuse me, I'm sorry for interrupting your photo-shoot, but we're in a hurry here....."

"Ah, Kashiwada....."

I hurriedly brought Koigasaki away from the place.

"Huuh ~, that guy was really unbelievable! It was obvious that he wanted to take a pic of my panties..... He's seriously terrible! Are all **Otakus** like that!?"

After putting some distance away, Koigasaki started ranting about that guy.

She seemed fine to me and I was relieved.

I looked at Koigasaki once again. Even though she was indeed wearing the uniform from LoveMinus, her hair remained the same; it was just 'Koigasaki wearing a uniform from LoveMinus'. You can't call that cosplay.

"Haah ~ jeez, this is really horrible! Some people almost managed to take weird pictures of me, the place is crawling with guys, and they are selling books with erotic covers....."

At that moment, I could tell that Koigasaki's expression changed from anger to sadness.

"And it seems like Suzuki-kun hates me....."

She murmured to herself. As I thought, she heard what Suzuki said and seemed to be pretty depressed about it.

"He doesn't hate you. He was just taken in by the rumors."

"But he called me unbelievable. 'Koigasaki is unbelievable'....."

Koigasaki was already on the verge of tears.

"It'll be fine! I cleared that up with him. I got Suzuki to understand that the **Bitch** rumor was untrue!"

"..... really? ..... but, it's not just that. I also heard what he said before that. Suzuki-kun has no intention of getting a girlfriend outside of his games, right?"

"Mm....., you heard that too?"

"I'm totally different from the game character that Suzuki likes..... and I can't become that....."

Koigasaki was completely in pessimistic mode. She had her head hanging, ready to cry anytime.

The usually proactive, positive, strong-willed Koigasaki, who was willing to plunge into action to get what she wanted, wasn't there.

"Of course you are different. One's 2D, the other's 3D."

"..... 2D?"

"If you are different, then you just need to teach him the greatness of 3D! Think about the effort you've put in! For whom did you go to Akiba? Or play **Eroge**? You aren't even an **Otaku**, but yet you came to an 'Only' event and even cosplayed!? It's all for Suzuki! Are you going to let all that effort go to waste!?"

Koigasaki was stunned by my inadvertent heated-up persuasion.

"..... why did you get so heated-up? It's beyond my understanding."

"Eh, nothing..... I just thought it's unlike a girl like you , who's usually so strong-willed, to get so despondent..... "

It was also beyond my own understanding why I got so riled up for Koigasaki's sake.

She had always made a fool of me, demeaned me, and really pissed me off a lot. That was supposed to be the case, so why? I thought that I just didn't want to see her getting so down.

Why did I do so much for a girl, I wondered.

"Fuuhn."

Koigasaki stared at my face for a while, and broke into a small smile.

"Well, it might be just like you said. I've already put in so much effort, after all....."

"Yeah, right? It'll be a pity to give up and let it go to waste!"

"..... give up? No one said anything about giving up!"

I thought she was totally in 'given-up' mode just now, and now, she suddenly said that. In a strong-willed manner.

And without saying anything further, she started walking.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Do you still need to ask? I haven't accomplished today's objective yet! Just now, I got scared and ran away , but I'll definitely talk to Suzuki this time!

I followed after Koigasaki, who had completely recovered back to her usual self. I felt somewhat relieved as I looked at the back of her usual and strong-willed self .

However, at Tanaka-kun's booth, everything had been cleared out and neither Suzuki nor Tanaka-kun were around.

"Did they go back already....."

"Ehh, are you kidding me? Then, this whole trip I took the trouble to make has become meaningless!"

Koigasaki's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"Well, there's always another chance. Don't feel down."

"It's not like I'm feeling down!"

Having turned around to rebuke me, Koigasaki continued in her usual strong-willed voice,

"I have to work harder tomorrow..... you'd better lend me a hand too!"

"Ah, I'm starved."

My stomach had been growling for a while.

"I agree. We haven't had lunch, after all."

"I haven't really eaten anything since morning!"

"What? Did you oversleep?"

"No, not that. There wasn't anyone at home in the morning, so there was only cup noodles for me. Ah, I didn't feel like eating cup noodles in the morning, so I left home without eating anything."

"......? Fuuhn."

Koigasaki made a somewhat incredulous face, but she didn't comment further.

I had no idea what it was that I said that had made her so incredulous.

"Well, I'm also hungry. Why don't we go eat something?"

I was deeply surprised by Koigasaki's suggestion.

What surprised me the most was that she just invited me to have dinner with her without any ulterior motive.

Up till now, we had acted together for a number of times, but I went along only for the sake of helping her achieve her objective.

There wasn't a single instance of us spending time together when she didn't have something to gain from it.

Even though it was just a matter of having a meal together because both of us happened to be hungry, I couldn't help but feel surprised.

"What? Why are you keeping quiet? If you don't want to go, it's fine."

"No! I'm going, I'm going! Let's go!"

Well, this wasn't the time to worry about needless things. My empty stomach was already unbearable.

After Koigasaki got changed, we left the event venue and walked to the station. Maybe it was because both of us were tired, we kept silent throughout. But the atmosphere didn't seem strange nor heavy (or it might just have been how I felt).

It was just nice that there was a fast food restaurant before the station.

"Is that ok?"

"Aa-uhn, that's fine too, huh?"

We entered the shop and ordered at the counter.

Right now, I was needlessly nervous.

Some time ago, the two of us went to Harajuku for a ' mock date'. Right now, it felt more like a date than back then.

At that time, we went to Harajuku purely because Koigasaki wanted to make me buy clothes for her.

Right now, the two of us were having a meal at a fast food restaurant because we were both hungry. Even though it was really nothing out of the ordinary, it just felt a little like a date..... and while the thought of Koigasaki calling me a 『Virgin Fag if she found out was turning in my mind, I proceeded to order a hamburger and fries set. Koigasaki, who was making her order next to me, suddenly asked.

"Hey Kashiwada, what did you get!?"

"Eh, just a normal hamburger set....."

"Seriously!? Then I'll have that as well..... no, but I guess it's better to have one with cheese....."

As her words trailed off, Koigasaki ordered the same set as me.

After getting our orders almost immediately, we headed to the seats on the second floor.

"You were pretty indecisive."

"Yeah, I rarely come here, so I wanted to eat this and that."

After finding a suitable seat, we sat across each other.

"You rarely come here? I thought **Gyaru**s only eat McD. Was I wrong?"

"What kind of prejudice is that? Indeed, I've come here a number of times when hanging out with my friends, but other than that, I don't come here at all."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. If I go out with my family, we definitely won't come here. More like, my parents tell me not to come here too often."

"Hehh?"

What a strange family, I thought, but since different families had different circumstances, I didn't say that out loud.

"Thanks for the food!"

Koigasaki civilly put her palms together, then stretched her hand out towards the food.

She was surprisingly well-mannered.

"Ah, like I thought, it's actually pretty tasty! Papa said that it tastes bad, but it's been a while since I had one, and it's just as good."

Koigasaki became absorbed in the hamburger which she hadn't eaten for a long time.

It was rare to see someone get so happy for eating a hamburger. Well, it was really good, though.

"Hey, how did you fall for Hasegawa-san?"

Koigasaki covered her mouth with her hand while asking me that.

Hearing that abrupt question, I almost spat out the coke in my mouth.

"E-Erh..... on the day of the school entrance ceremony, well, it was love at first sight....."

That first day of school was an impactful, unforgettable day. On top of her angelic kindness, she was a beautiful girl, and her looks were totally my type. I had never seen a girl like that before, and I fell in love at first sight.

"Fuuhn, Hasegawa-san is super cute, isn't she? Is she your first love?"

"Eh..... no....."

My words halted at Koigasaki's unexpected question.

To be frank, my first love had turned into unwanted memories that were painful to even think about.

"You like a girl before?"

"Aah, well, yeah, in middle school....."

"Seriously? Like I thought, it's nice to be in a co-ed! Did you confess?"

Crap. If we continued with this topic, it would really get painful.

"It doesn't matter now, does it? What about you? How did you come to like Suzuki?"

It might be a little pushy of me, but I tried my best to change the subject.

"Eh? Me?"

It was easy to tell that Koigasaki's face turned red at my question.

"It was also love at first sight for me, though."

Koigasaki frantically washed down the stuff in her mouth with her juice.

"There's a manga called 『Kimi ni Todoitara[34], right? "

She suddenly said the title of a manga out of the blue, and a question mark appeared in my head.

『Kimi ni Todoitara..... I had never read it, but I'd heard about it. It was a Shoujo manga[35] that was selling like hot cakes.

"When I read that in middle school, I was really moved ! Kazamaki-kun, the protagonist guy, is really kind to girls and I was overwhelmed to think that such a guy could exist....."

Hey, that's not a real person, but a manga character.....

"And that's when I decided that I'll get into a coed school and fall in love with a guy like Kazamaki-kun!"

"Could that be the reason why you came to a coed school even though you can't deal well with guys?"

"Yeah! You really do get it, don't you!"

Is her brain really that simplistic, I wondered.

"And then, during the school entrance ceremony, I had a really fated encounter ~!"

As if her earlier depression was all a lie, heart marks surfaced in Koigasaki's eyes. Aah, she's like a **Sweet(LOL)** in a drawing.....

"When I was heading towards the school that day, a guy called out to me. *Fujimi-High school is this way, right?* He said. I was really flustered having a guy talk to me, and when I turned to look at him..... I saw a really cool guy who made me feel elated, just like Kazamaki-kun! I hurriedly replied, *Yes!*, and again, just like Kazamaki-kun, he returned a friendly smile and said, *Thank you!*....."

"That guy is Suzuki-kun, huh....."

"Yeah! Doesn't that give you goosebumps? Isn't this the same situation as in 『Kimi ni Todoitara? And Suzuki-kun also really resembles Kazamaki-kun! Now he has brown hair, but at that time, his hair was black just like the real Kazamaki-kun! Ah, though brown hair also suits him, and he looks good with it, so I don't mind!"

"Is that so.....?" I never read that manga, so I wouldn't know about it....."

Koigasaki went on and said *You're an **Otaku**, yet you've never read a manga that the whole nation reads?*, and so on and so forth, but upon recalling her meeting with Suzuki, she looked like she was in heaven.

"You know, you keep calling me creepy again and again, but aren't you pretty **Otaku**-ish! You fell in love with a guy just because it resembled a situation in a manga....."

"You're annoying. Don't group me together with you!"

Even Koigasaki was **Otaku** material. The type called **Shoujo** manga **Otaku**.

"So you never fell in love with anyone during middle school?"

"None. I've always attended all girls' school and though there were a number of times that friends wanted to introduce guys to me, I didn't really agree with the way they went about it."

"Eh? You've been fascinated by love since middle school, so isn't it great to have someone introduce you?"

I didn't really get how girls thought. If I had guy friends who wanted to introduce a girl to me, I would probably swallow it hook, line and sinker.

"Since middle school, the friends around me would hook up with guys they met at group dates or with guys who hit on them, so a lot of them had boyfriends, but isn't that unbelievable!?"

"Erm, what's unbelievable?"

"Isn't it very fake!? I don't really get why they even dated just like that!? It's definitely not true love!"

While speaking, for some reason, Koigasaki started getting roused up.

"Since it was popular among my friends, I bought some cellphone novels to read, and the protagonist is really fake! I don't get it at all. I didn't buy it to read that kind of stuff."

I supposed Koigasaki was referring to the cellphone novel that she dropped when she bumped into me.

I thought she read those because she liked them, but it seemed like that wasn't the case.

I wanted to put in a word or two, but Koigasaki was going off non-stop like a machine gun.

"When I came to this coed high school, it seems the people around me were messing around a lot. The friends around me, after getting hit on, exchange their numbers and start going out just like that; and in just a month, they..... did it. And they break up before the year's even up. Seriously, aren't they unbelievable!?"

"Aah..... sounds like those loose girls of the modern era....."

"Yeah, right!? They are too loose! I can't believe it! That can't be true love!"

Koigasaki lightly crushed her cup of juice in her hand.

"..... fuuh. But I'm surprised. This is the first time we agree on something."

Koigasaki drank up the rest of the juice in her crushed cup in one go, heaved out a sigh, and finally calmed down.

"Aah..... indeed."

I was really surprised that Koigasaki abhorred loose girls so much. Even though she was a **Sweet(LOL)** girl with her head filled by thoughts of romance, she properly valued her chastity.

"The friends around me tell me, *isn't it normal?*. They're all weird. You're the first person so far who's agreed with me."

"Most people these days have that kind of loose thinking."

As I looked at Koigasaki, who was eating her fries while complaining, a sense of wonder fell on me.

She was a **Gyaru** who dyed her hair brown, wore heavy make-up, a short skirt, and was fastidious about guys, yet at the same time she couldn't deal well with guys and was surprisingly pure on the inside.

Aside from her family, I was probably the first guy she hung out with alone together (more like, it was the same for me).

There was probably no other girl like her, whose beliefs didn't match up to her appearance, was there?

"What? What are you looking at? If you want to say something, why not just say it?"

"Eh, erm....."

As I'd kept quiet while staring at Koigasaki, it had roused her displeasure. There was really nothing I wanted to say, but I thought I had to say something, so I just said,

"How about..... wearing thinner make-up?"

"..... huuh!? It really pisses me off to hear you telling me what to do for my appearance!"

"Aah, that's right..... forget it."

I myself didn't even know why I said that. I thought that if Koigasaki shed her make-up, she would look cuter and be more of my type. I wanted to erase what I just said and the thoughts I just had.

We finished our meals, returned the trays, and left the shop.

After that, we returned to the station. I thought we would split off there right away.

I couldn't hide my surprise after hearing what Koigasaki said next.

"Which reminds me, Kashiwada, tell me your number."

Number.....

Exchanging contacts..... that makes us sound like friends.

No, maybe we already are friends? Is it okay to say that? About our relationship.

"Today, it was great that we successfully met up at the appointed place, but if either of us had been late, it would have been troublesome, right? We should have exchanged our contacts at school beforehand."

"A-aah, yeah right....."

Trying my best to maintain a calm front and hide my inner turmoil, I took out my cellphone from my pocket.

"Hey, you still haven't switched to a smartphone!? And, what model is that ancient phone of yours!? I've never seen it before!"

..... my blood started boiling at my own self, for feeling bashful in front of this really rude girl a moment earlier.

"You're annoying. It's just that I've been using the phone I first got from my parents in middle school! I'm the kind of guy who takes good care of my stuff!"

While raging, I brought up the infra-communication screen.

"Ah, I have no infra-communication since mine's a smartphone ~"

Even though she was just stating a fact, I could hear the extreme displeasure in her voice.

By scanning the QR code displayed on Koigasaki's phone with my bar code reader, I got her contact, stored it, then sent mine via mail to her. After exchanging our contacts, we finally parted ways.

While riding the train, without thinking, I checked Koigasaki's mail address. At that moment, I realized something. It was the moment of realization that aside from my family, she was the first female contact I had in my phone.

This was perhaps the first time I'd made a female friend.

Though I wasn't sure if I could call this a friendship.

Before I knew it, the corners of my mouth had relaxed unconsciously.

Chapter 8

The next day, upon reaching school, I saw a student carrying a highly piled up stack of notes while walking along the corridor.

It was Hasegawa. She was probably performing her duty as a class rep, and in the midst of carrying the notes on behalf of the entire class to some place.

"A-are you all right!?"

I called out to Hasegawa. My voice went slightly into falsetto range from my nervousness. After what happened yesterday, I made a firm decision to learn from Koigasaki and work harder myself. That's probably why I could call out to her.

"....."

I stepped closer to Hasegawa's side and said, "I'll take half of them."

"..... thank you, but, it's ok."

Hasegawa declined politely. Even though I was crushed at hearing those words, seeing Hasegawa stagger with her load, I said,

"No, doesn't look ok to me..... I'll carry some."

Before thinking about how I want Hasegawa to think well of me, I was really worried about her and thus said those words without thinking.

"Sorry, it was really unreasonable of me to try carrying so much at once....."

Hasegawa placed the notes on the floor, and split them in half. I picked up half of them.

"T-there's no need to apologize, it's nothing....."

Hasegawa started off towards our class with the notes in hand, and I followed after her. Hasegawa never replied and we continued on without exchanging any more words.

"Thank you."

Hearing Hasegawa's words of thanks made me jubilant on the inside, but I continued to act cool on the outside.

While saying her words of thanks, Hasegawa never once showed a smile and remained expressionless, as always.

"E-erm."

Having finished her duties, just as Hasegawa was about to return to her seat, I called out to her.

Compared to Koigasaki's efforts yesterday, mine were still not enough. This won't do, and I need to work harder, I thought.

"I-if, a-anything comes up again next time..... I'll give you a hand."

I finally spoke my mind. That proclamation was unthinkable for me, who had been rather timid up till then.

Hasegawa said nothing to my words.

However, I did not miss it.

Hasegawa once again showed me her smile.

It wasn't a generous smile like the one I saw when I first met her, just a small smile.

But it was a kind smile. There is no question that she is a kind person if she can smile like that. One day, I want to see that same generous smile that I saw on the first day of school.

While day-dreaming about that, I returned to my seat.

Even though I've always been helping Hasegawa out with her duties, today is the first time I talked to her. Since I had this thought that I would never be able to start a conversation with another person in my entire life, I was rather surprised at myself.

With this, I made up my mind to work harder in order to talk to Hasegawa just like I did today.

"Kashiwada, got some time?"

During the next break, I was unexpectedly called at the corridor.

Upon turning around, I was taken aback. There stood Koigasaki's friends, Sasagawa Miki and Amemiya Mizuki.

We hadn't talked since the karaoke session, and I'd fully expected that to remain unchanged.

"H-how may I help you?"

In spite of being in the same school year, I ended up using polite language without thinking.

Once again, I found that appearance-wise, both Sasagawa and Amemiya belong to the more flashy type of **Gyaru**s, and quite honestly, that made me quite fearful of them.

"You know, Kashiwada, recently, haven't you been on really good terms with Momo?",

started Sasagawa.

"I mean..... it's hard to say this but, can you stop getting close to Momo in class?"

On hearing Sasagawa's words, my mind froze.

"Recently, Momo's been getting bombarded by Ashida and other guys with questions like, 'why won't you talk to me yet you're on such good terms with Kashiwada?'. She can't seem to deal well with those delinquent-looking guys and always gets scared. If I'm around, I can help her out, but I feel bad for her when the guys try to get to her when she's alone.....",

said Sasagawa with a pained look.

"Seriously..... I didn't know."

That Koigasaki actually had to go through all that because of me.

"Huuh? Are you really clueless about it!?"

At that moment, Amemiya, who had been standing behind Sasagawa, spoke up for the first time.

"You know, I think Momo talks to someone like you because she's a really kind girl, but it's really a bother to her."

Said Amemiya in an irritated tone.

"Rather, you're really causing a lot of trouble to her. Isn't it because you're friendly with Momo that makes others think less of her? And thus, since we are friends with Momo, it also affects our reputation. Get it?"

"Mizuki, stop it."

Sasagawa stopped Amemiya from going on further.

"Well, I'm really sorry, but this is what it's all about....."

After saying that, both Sasagawa and Amemiya left.

For a while, I stood rooted to the spot, unable to move.

The reality that I'd just heard caused my mind to go blank.

Because of me, Koigasaki got bothered by the delinquent guys in my class.

Amemiya told me that I was a bother.

And above all, Koigasaki herself actually found me to be a bother.

That's what Amemiya said earlier.

If what Amemiya said was true, then, indeed, my existence was nothing more than a bother to Koigasaki.

Because of me, Koigasaki's reputation had suffered.

Because of me, she got involved with delinquents.

Unable to think about anything anymore, I walked unsteadily to the classroom.

Having gone to an 'Only' event with just the two of us, having dinner together, I felt that I had gotten a little closer to Koigasaki.

It was unexpected — that in truth, Koigasaki found me a bother.

Just as I thought, even if an **Otaku** like me tries hard, there's no way I can ever become a **Riajuu** or a cool guy.

In the end, I'm only good enough to be the target of ridicule and mockery.

Since I got ahead of myself, it's a given for me to be punished.

This is the third time I'm facing despair in my life.

The first time was when I was a freshman in middle school.

In the past, I actually belonged to the athletic type of guy. In elementary school, I was in the baseball club. I was quick on my feet and pretty good at sports, hence was a pretty active player. I had female friends, too, and was even kind of popular with girls.

However, in middle school, under the influence of my friends, I became an **Otaku**. Without caring about how others looked at me, I engaged in **Otaku** talk openly in class. The guys whom I'd been close to in elementary school started shunning me. I got ostracized at my

baseball club, and at the end of my first year in middle school, I stopped playing baseball, a sport I'd been playing for about four years. And from then on, I devoted myself to my **Otaku** hobbies.

My second time of despair was the summer of my third year of middle school. It was the day I got repudiated by the girl I liked and was bad-mouthed by other girls behind my back.

And today, at this moment, is the third time.

From that day onward, I ended up avoiding Koigasaki.

Even when Koigasaki called out to me after school, I would tell her, "sorry, but I've got something to do", and quickly went home.

This became the attitude I adopted every time I remembered Amemiya saying I was a bother to Koigasaki.

And because of that, in time, Koigasaki never talked to me again.

Even after taking the trouble to exchange our mail addresses and contact numbers, in the end, we never had a single exchange over the phone.

In the meantime, even Kiritani, who used to be friendly with me, started hanging around the more popular guys, and gradually talked less and less to me. After changing our seats, we were no longer next to each other and pretty much stopped talking altogether.

Since these were the only two people I could get along with originally, after all that, I became ostracized in class.

As usual, I was far away from Hasegawa and we never talked to each other again. I completely gave up on Hasegawa, and also stopped helping her out.

After giving up on everything, I became apathetic. I also stopped my efforts to become more stylish, giving up on styling my hair and trimming my eyebrows. At this point in time, there was no other guy in class who looked worse than me.

Not just that. Suzuki, who used to be attached to me, also stayed away from me. He became friendly with the **Otaku**s in his class, and no longer troubled by having no **Otaku** friends, he stopped talking to me.

With that, without making any new friends, I spent my entire high school life without a single close friend. Even middle school was better than this.

After failing my university entrance exams, and my worst high school days finally over, my life sunk into despair.

No hope ever came. I no longer cared about anything.

But, if there was one thing I was concerned about...

..... did she manage to get together with him?

"Wooaaahhhhhhh!"

As I awoke with a roar, I found myself on my bed in my bedroom.

Beside my pillow, an anime song ringtone was playing noisily. Thanks to this, I was awakened from my sleep.

On the display, it showed, "Incoming Call : Kiritani".

"Hello....."

I said in a raspy voice. Remembering now, I've been down with the flu and had been sleeping after taking sick leave from school.

"Hey, Kashiwada, are you ok..... You've been absent for 3 days already."

"Kiritani.....? You're still my friend..... uuuwh, you're such a great guy....."

"Huuh!? What's wrong, you're so creepy..... You seem fine, I'm hanging up."

At that moment, Kiritani really hung up. A glance at the clock told me it was still mid-morning, and he must have called during the brief interval between class periods.

I'd had a long nightmare and appeared to be crying for some reason. My cheeks felt wet.

It was a really terrible dream. And it was frighteningly close to reality.

Since the day when Sasagawa and Amemiya told me not to get close to Koigasaki, I started avoiding Koigasaki , and in about three days, I was down with influenza. After that, I took sick leave from school for three days.

As my mental state had been seriously weakened, it probably affected my physical health as well, I thought.

I looked at my mobile. Mails from Koigasaki..... never came. Well, I'm the one who started avoiding her, so that's to be expected.

I took my temperature with a nearby thermometer; my fever had already come down.

"Naoki, I'm coming in."

After a knock on the door, Mom came in.

"Oh, you're awake?"

Mom put a bowl of porridge beside my bed.

"Eat this. You've been sleeping for pretty much the whole of the past two days. Akari is also very worried."

Akari is worried? That little sister of mine with her bad personality and prejudice against me..... it's probably some kind of mistake.

"How are you feeling?"

"No good..... I still feel feverish and my voice's sounding raspy....."

"Wait, 35.6 degrees!? Aside from your throat, you have totally recovered, haven't you!? You'll be able to attend school next week, right?"

After taking my temperature, I just left the thermometer as it was, and consequently, my lie was seen through.

"I don't want..... to go to school....."

I whined to Mom like a kid, if I say so myself.

"You don't want to go? Naoki, aren't you enjoying yourself more in high school than when you were in middle school? Every morning, you would busy yourself with your hair and the like, and it looked like you were hanging out with your classmates, too."

"I was enjoying myself? I....."

"You were enjoying yourself, very much. What happened? Did you fight with your friend?"

"I didn't..... fight or anything, but it's something close to that..... I suppose....."

We did not fight. It's just that I knew I wasn't 'welcome ', so I just avoided her on my own accord.

"If you fought, the best thing to do is be the first to apologize. You don't want to keep up that awkwardness, right? If you apologize, you can go back to being friends. "

Mom said it so simply, but it wasn't about apologies or anything like that. In the first place, I was not 'welcome'.

Even the act of talking to her was unforgivable.

So on Monday, after completely recovering from my influenza, I went to school full of melancholy.

Upon entering the classroom, I was showered by looks from my classmates.

The guys who I normally don't talk to asked me, "Are you already ok?"

Once I reached my seat, Kiritani said, "You've completely recovered, right!? Don't spread it to me!?".

I was happy and a little touched by the warmth of my classmates.

At that moment, I noticed.

Koigasaki was looking at me.

I didn't know why, but she was looking intently at me with a sad look on her face.

But I quickly averted my eyes.

On that day too, without exchanging a single word with

Koigasaki, I finished all my classes. Even though it was just the eighth day since I'd started avoiding Koigasaki, it felt like we hadn't talked with each other for ages.

Perhaps, we might never talk to each other again. Just like in that dream.....

Just as I was about to head home, I remembered that I'd left the textbook I needed for the quiz the next day under my desk, and I returned to class to retrieve it.

When I reached the classroom, I found the door slightly ajar, and I could hear voices coming from inside.

"Koigasaki-chan, why do you prefer someone like Kashiwada?"

It was the voice of my delinquent-looking classmate, Ashida.

It seemed like Koigasaki was inside and Ashida was talking to her.

"In spite of finding him a bother, you still talked to him, right? For a guy like him, he's really getting ahead of himself to be talking to you, right?"

Koigasaki was being bothered by Ashida because of me. It was just as Sasagawa said.

Koigasaki did not say anything.

My legs froze.

What's this?

Ah, that's right.....

"Huuh? There's no way I would like him, please don't screw with me, seriously."

The voice of the girl I liked in middle school rang out in my head.

This is the same situation. Just like in my last year of middle school.

It was the very worst day of my life when I got repudiated by the girl I liked, a day I could not forget even if I wanted to.

That traumatic day which I had relived in my dreams again and again, a day which I could not help but remember again and again.

"You actually found him creepy, right? Am I right?"

Ashida's voice got louder and became more and more intimidating.

Stop it.

Don't ask her any more.

If I were to hear from Koigasaki's own mouth that I was really a bother, I would never be able to get back on my feet this time round.

I wanted to escape from this place right there and then, but my legs were cramped and wouldn't move.

"..... I'll"

"Eh?"

"..... I'll..... whoever speaks badly of him."

Said Koigasaki.

She said it with a soft voice that was barely audible. Ashida seemed to have missed it, but I could hear it clearly.

"I'll kill whoever speaks badly of him."

I doubted my ears. But without a doubt, Koigasaki did say that.

That's a line from the anime 『Sakuragaoka Girls' High School which I recommended to Koigasaki, a line which the protagonist said when she stuck up for her rival.

On top of ridiculing the anime and the protagonist, Koigasaki said that she wouldn't watch it if Suzuki wasn't watching it.

And yet, she said that line from the show.

Was it for sticking up for me?

"Eh? What? What did you say?"

Ashida asked again. I stood there, kept quiet and listened carefully.

"Don't bad-mouth Kashiwada, was what I said. He's my friend."

Koigasaki said clearly in a shaking voice.

She can't deal well with guys. Especially when it comes to delinquent guys like Ashida, she can't speak to them.

And yet, she's resisting Ashida.

She said that I was a friend. She clearly said that.

"Huuh!? What the hell did you say!? Friend? That creepy guy? Do you even know what you are saying!?"

"..... compared to a person like you, who ridicules people whom you haven't even spoken to, Kashiwada is a much more splendid person."

A splendid person.

Koigasaki just called me a splendid person.

I was already used to getting repudiated by girls.

I thought that there weren't any girls who would ever approve of a person like me.

However, I still held a hope in my heart.

I'm on the verge of tears right now.

"Huuhh!? What the hell are you....."

Ashida snapped on hearing Koigasaki's words.

Worried about Koigasaki, I became anxious, swung the door open and entered the classroom.

"Eh..... Kashiwada....."

Ashida was grabbing onto Koigasaki's arm.

"Let go of her hand!"

If I might say so myself, I ended up uttering that death-cold line that sounded like a line from a manga, but this isn't the time for that.

"What the hell is with you guys? Did you already do it!? That's really gross!"

Ashida thrust Koigasaki away.

"Kya!"

Koigasaki collapsed onto the ground.

"H-hey! What are you doing!?"

My voice was completely shaking. Ashida is well-built, and I didn't feel I could win against him in a fight.

But, if I backed down now, I would remain as I was.

I would remain the same weak, cowardly, unbecoming person that I was.

Koigasaki had stuck up for me. In spite of being unable to deal with guys, she stuck up for me and rebutted Ashida.

That's why it was now my turn to protect Koigasaki.

I used all my strength to ram my body into Ashida. With his legs tangled up, Ashida fell to the ground and I pinned him down with my body.

"Koigasaki, run!"

I yelled with the loudest ever voice in my life.

"Eh..... no way....."

"Don't just stand there, run!"

My voice gave Koigasaki a start, and while looking a little confused, she started running, out of the classroom.

"Hehh, that's pretty cool of you."

In the next instant, Ashida punched me on my cheek.

"Ouch....."

I tasted blood in my mouth.

"What's with you? Don't tell me you are confident in your fighting skills~?"

Ashida grabbed me by the collar as I lied on the ground.

"I don't have..... that kind of confidence....."

"But you want to act cool in front of your beloved girlfriend, huh~? That's real cool!"

Ashida sneered at me.

"She's not my beloved, nor my girlfriend!"

That's right. I have no romantic feelings for Koigasaki. A girl with a bad personality like her is really off my charts and falling for her would be the last thing I do. The only girl I am and have always been in love with since the first day I met her on the first day of high school is Hasegawa Midori.

But right now, I have to risk my life to protect an important friend of mine.

Just like how she stuck up for me.

I turned my eyes to the corridor. Probably just one minute has passed since Koigasaki escaped from the classroom. But if she ran at full speed, she should be far away from here by now.

"I have no confidence in fighting but....."

"But what?"

I kicked Ashida in the shin with all my strength.

"Wha, it hurts.....!"

The moment Ashida let go of my collar from the pain, I took that chance and ran out of the classroom as fast as I could.

"What, in the end you're going to just run!?"

Ashida immediately came chasing after me.

I ran out of the classroom along the corridor at full speed, and before long, I reached the stairs and hopped down two steps at a time.

"Wha..... fast....."

I could hear Ashida's voice from behind.

I no longer knew whether Ashida could hear me or not , but I still yelled out smugly, "I don't have confidence in fighting, but I do have confidence in my speed!!"

When I was in elementary school, I was the fastest guy in class. Even though my speed might have gotten a bit worse since quitting baseball, I'm still going strong.

Once I reached the first floor, still wearing my indoor shoes, I exited the school into a crowded street. I stopped for the first time and turned around.

There was no sign of Ashida. Rather, I seemed to have lost him back when I was ran down the stairs.

It'd been a while since I sprinted at full speed, and feeling tired, I sat down. Even though passers-by were looking at me, I didn't have the leisure to concern myself with that.

I remembered Koigasaki and took out my cellphone to call her.

Koigasaki picked up even before the first dial tone was up.

"Kashiwada!? Are you all right!?"

"Aah..... haah..... I'm, all right..... where are you, now. ....."

I asked in between my ragged breathing.

"Now? I'm at the door to the teachers' room."

"Eh!? Why..... the teachers' room.....?"

"I was thinking of getting Umeda-sensei, the P.E. teacher, to stop Ashida....."

"Wha!? No, it's fine, Ashida is already gone....."

"Really? It's really fine!? Where are you now!?"

"I'm just outside the school....."

"Got it! I'll be right there!"

Koigasaki really did appear almost immediately after hanging up. It seemed like she ran here.

"Kashiwada!"

Koigasaki had been on the verge of tears, but, upon seeing the traces of me getting punched, she broke down.

"You aren't all right at all! The infirmary..... ah, but the doctor probably left already....."

"No, seriously, this is no big deal....."

"You can't call that 'no big deal'! Ah, that's right."

Koigasaki appeared to have thought of something; she then rushed to the road and waved her hand. A taxi then stopped before us.

"Eh!? Where are....."

"To my place. It's just a short distance away."

"Eeh!? There's no need to."

"No! We have to treat it!"

"Well, even so, we can walk..... I don't have any money....."

"Don't worry about money! Come on, quickly!"

I was somewhat forcefully pushed into the taxi by Koigasaki.

"Excuse me, please make a right turn at the third traffic light....."

Koigasaki gave the directions to her home to the taxi driver with ease.

Don't tell me this girl is used to going home by taxi.....

"What happened after that!? What about Ashida!?"

"Aah, I managed to get away somehow."

"Is that so.....? I..... never thought that you'd do something so reckless....."

Koigasaki was still crying.

About five minutes later, Koigasaki stopped the taxi. She hurriedly paid the fare.

"I'll return you the money tomorrow....."

"Huuh!? I said don't worry about it."

As I got off the taxi, I was taken aback.

The house that has Koigasaki on its nameplate..... is an opulent mansion.

It's probably about three times larger than my house.

Even though I'd speculated that Koigasaki might be a rich man's daughter, to think that it was actually true...

As I stepped up to the large entrance hall, I said in a small voice, "Sorry for bothering.....".

Upon climbing the steps, I reached the living room and there, I saw a beautiful woman sitting on the sofa. I guessed it must be Koigasaki's older sister.

"Momo, welcome back. Oh, hello~! Are you a friend of Momo?"

"He is. Mama, can you get me the first-aid kit?"

Koigasaki's reply surprised me. The person I thought to be Koigasaki's big sister appeared to be her mother. She had a good figure and wore her makeup even

though she was at home, making her look so young that one could easily mistake her to be in her late twenties. Way too different from my Mom.

"Sorry for bothering. Excuse me for coming unannounced....."

"No no, thanks for taking care of Momo. I never expected Momo would bring a guy back~! Oh my, that looks painful! Give me a second."

Koigasak's mother took out a first-aid kit from the cupboard.

"What happened? Did you fall?"

"Yeah..... well, something like that."

Koigasaki brushed it off. Koigasaki's mother urged me to sit on the sofa, and started disinfecting my wounds.

"Sorry to trouble you. Thank you....."

After the disinfection was done, I got up from where I was sitting and hastily headed for the door. However.

"Oh my, you're going back already!? Since you're already here, might as well stay for a bit."

The words of Koigasaki's mother held me back.

"Kashiwada, let's go to my room."

I was deeply surprised by Koigasaki's suggestion.

"Eeh? Can't you guys talk here?"

"No way! If we talk here, Mama, you'll definitely say something unnecessary!"

Ignoring her mother's attempt to hold us back, Koigasaki walked briskly to her room. I kept quiet and followed after her.

I was a little..... no, I was actually quite nervous.

This was the first time in my life I was entering a girl's room, as if I had something to hide. As expected, Koigasaki's room looked pretty much like a girl's room, with a uniform pink coloring her walls, curtains and other parts of the room, as well as plush toys and other cute stuff lining her shelves.

Her bookshelves also had Shoujo manga, fashion magazines and the like. There were also affixed posters of idols.

I sat down on a pink sofa after Koigasaki prompted me , but still couldn't relax.

"I say, why did you do such a reckless thing!"

While I was looking around studying Koigasaki's room, she suddenly burst out angrily at me.

"I wasn't being reckless..... doing that was the only thought that I had in my mind."

"I'm just glad you got away with just these wounds, but, when I think of how much worse it could have been. ....."

It had taken her a while to stop crying earlier, but now, she sounded like she was about to break down again.

"..... thanks."

"Eh?"

"Thanks for saving me....."

Her straightforward words of thanks ended up throwing me off balance somehow.

"I-It's not something you need to thank me for..... ah, which reminds me."

"What?"

"Did you watch 『Sakuragaoka Girls' High School!?"

"Eh, w-why....."

As if she never expected me to have heard that line, Koigasaki reacted in a flustered manner,

"W-Well, erm, about three days ago, I just happened to go to Tsutaya to loan out a DVD. And, it just happened that the DVD I wanted to watch had been loaned out to someone else, so I thought I could kill some time by checking out what this strange anime is all about, that's all!"

She actually watched the anime I recommended..... Despite having proclaimed that she would never watch it .

"How was it?"

"It was..... unexpectedly, somewhat interesting. Though those weird **Otaku**-pandering scenes were really annoying."

"Really!?"

This was perhaps the first time Koigasaki had acknowledged the **Otaku** culture. If she kept this up, maybe the day of her becoming an **Otaku** wasn't that far off.

"Forget about that! I'm really angry, you know!?"

"..... hehh?"

I gave Koigasaki a blank look at her sudden change in attitude.

"Why did you..... suddenly start ignoring me!? When I tried to talk you, you ran away. What's with that attitude !?"

So much happened that I'd forgotten about it, but this was the first time we'd properly talked ever since I started avoiding Koigasaki.

"Were you mad about something!?"

"Erh, it's not like....."

"Then, what is it.....?"

While Koigasaki was fuming angrily, there was also a trace of sadness in her expression.

"Didn't we agree to work with each other....."

"Erh..... I..... heard that I was causing you trouble."

"..... eh?"

Now that it's come to this, I suppose that it was just a rumor. After all, I heard clearly from Koigasaki's lips that I'm her friend.

"What's that about..... who told you that....."

"Your friend, Amemiya, if I remember correctly....."

On hearing that name, Koigasaki sighed out deeply.

"That girl..... has some problem with her personality..... That's the way she is..... I see, she doesn't think much of you....."

Upon saying that, as if she were afraid that what she just said would be a shock to me, she quickly added, " Rather, she's the type who hates all the plain-looking guys indiscriminately", which wasn't really much of a consolation, really. Well, I already knew that Amemiya hated me, so it wasn't really that much of a shock.

"She also told me not to get involved with you, Kashiwada....."

"I must be really hated."

I then understood why she took on that attitude at the karaoke.

"Anyway, I've never said anything about you causing me trouble."

"Yeah, I get it."

"..... eh?"

"From now on, I won't believe anything unless I hear it from your own mouth."

Now that I think about it, right from the beginning, the reason why I felt that I couldn't deal well with Koigasaki was because of a rumor that she was a bitch, a rumor that had no factual basis behind it.

This time round, I listened to someone else instead of Koigasaki herself and started avoiding her because of a misunderstanding.

Considering that, it seemed that I hadn't made any progress.

At the very least, I've made up my mind that from now on, I'll only believe what Koigasaki tells me.

"Fuuhn....."

Koigasaki avoided my eyes, perhaps out of embarrassment.

Then, as if remembering something, she said,

"By the way! One more thing! Did you get lazy on your appearance!? What's with your hair style!? And your eyebrows!? They're a mess!"

I then realized it upon hearing it. Ever since I started avoiding Koigasaki, I'd stopped trimming my eyebrows.

"Have you already given up on Hasegawa-san!?"

Which reminded me — recently, I hadn't been motivated enough to work on my appearance.

If this girl doesn't get on my case, I probably won't pay attention to it.

"There's no way I'm giving up."

To be frank, I did give up once.

I thought it was impossible for me to become a **Riajuu** and win Hasegawa's heart.

However.

I had forgotten.

That I have her.

That I have a reassuring ally called Koigasaki Momo.

"Aaahh, jeez! You're really such a lame, lazy, hopeless **Otaku**....."

Koigasaki ranted in exasperation while looking at me.

What? I thought I'dmade some good improvements, and everything's back to square one?

"I can't leave you alone."

"..... eh?"

Did Koigasaki just say that she couldn't leave me alone ?

"If I don't help you, you really can't do anything by yourself..... I've decided, I'll do everything I can to help make you a cool, stylish guy."

"..... eeeh?"

"In return, you will do even more than before to help me get closer to Suzuki-kun! I'll become an **Otaku** and become closer to Suzuki-kun!"

Declared Koigasaki with brimming confidence as she pointed a finger at me.

"..... aah, I get it! I can't ask for anything better! I'll also help you with everything I've got! So you'd best not forget what you just said!"

As an affirmation of our pact, we clasped each other's hands strongly.

"All right, I'll start doing my best again tomorrow! I'll definitely become a **Riajuu**! And set my flags with Hasegawa!"

When I'm standing beside this girl as a friend, I have to become a guy who doesn't look out of place beside her. I have to become a cool guy who not even Koigasaki's friends or the guys targeting her can complain about.

For that to happen, I must become more stylish, and more of a **Riajuu**.

As long as she's cheering me on, I'll never be daunted again.

This was the strong vow I had made to myself.

"What are you grinning about?"

"Eh, nothing....."

While I don't think I'd been smiling, it did seem like my face had relaxed.

"Well, I just thought of a common development that happens in manga and novels."

"Eh?"

"In manga, normally, the guy and girl who make some kind of pact usually end up being together..... ah, we'll be the exception, of course....."

I regretted it immediately after saying it. When I looked into Koigasaki's eyes.....

"Huuh!? You were thinking about such things!? Creepy!!"

.....

Aah, I shouldn't have said it. I really shouldn't have said it. Please turn back time.

"Ah, your head is really full of manga. All your thoughts are based on them. Haah~, it feels creepy."

"Stop it with the creepy creepy creepy thing! Didn't I say that we'll be the exception! I also don't want such a thing to happen!

I didn't make a girlfriend after entering high school.

But instead, I made a female friend with a venomous tongue.

Afterword

Hello everyone, I'm Murakami Rin.

I'm sincerely grateful to you for getting this 『I'll Make You into an **Otaku**, so Make Me into a **Riajuu**!』.

The original form of this work got gold at "The Second Next Fantasia Award", and thus I could turn this into a published book.

It was really a dream to me, to be able to get such a wonderful award with this first full-length novel of mine, which I completed despite being weak in writing, while using a dictionary to look up Japanese words. And to be able to have it turned into a book despite this, I'm truly beyond grateful.

Around summer, several months after March of last year when I submitted this work, I was on my way home after a company drinking party, in my drunk state, and a number I did not know appeared on my cellphone. That was the first time I got a call from Fujimi Shobou, who informed me I had passed the last round of selection. I

can still clearly remember rejoicing by myself at the platform of the station (LOL).

By the way, I was allowed to write a little about the author's profile; however, the failure episodes of 『Kashiwada Naoki, the protagonist of this novel, were modeled after my own personal failure episodes while I was still a student.

During my school days, just like Kashiwada, I dyed my hair in the bathroom as a beginner in stylish grooming, and my hair ended up blond, of all things. Of course, I never wanted to have an entire head of golden hair, but just wanted to brighten up a portion, and when I used bleach for this purpose, the result became unthinkable..... My Mom who was passing by the bathroom swung open the door to the bathroom and said angrily, "This head, you are not my kid!", and immediately gave me the money to go to the beauty salon to dye my hair back; my little sister roared with laughter. Ah, now that I think about it, this whole chain of events has already been told in the novel, huh.

While Kashiwada is a closet **Otaku** in high school, I was a public **Otaku** in high school.

During self-studying, I would be happily, openly (it should be okay, since I sat in the last two rows and was also using a book jacket ~) reading light novels or manga (furthermore, they belonged to the sorts of genres that would cause a terrible commotion if seen by ordinary folk), and the nearby seated non-**Otaku**s/**Riajuu**s (of course the word **Riaju** didn't exist in those days, LOL) would suddenly grab my book, look at what was inside, and furthermore pass that manga to other friends, who would also read it, and though it was a self-study period, the teacher would be there, so I couldn't walk around freely, and while seated, "R-Return it to me! (Sweat)", I would cry out softly; I would have nightmares like this (LOL).

There was also another time, maybe I lost my mind then, during the holidays. I painted my nails with black polish (perhaps I was aiming for a Visual Kei look?), and on the next day at school, there was a uniform and hair inspection, and in haste, I shed my nail polish (I actually did that in school), but I couldn't get rid of it cleanly due to the hurry, and when my homeroom teacher saw the

remaining black portions on my nails, "Aah, Murakami, you are drawing manga, huh", for some reason, he mistook my nail polish for manga ink and didn't get angry..... (rather, it might have been much preferable if he got angry at my nail polish perhaps..... how did my homeroom teacher know that I've been drawing manga... ...)

Anyway, it's no longer the same with Kashiwada, huh. My black history. I couldn't stop recalling it.

However, fortunately, there were many **Otaku**s at the school I went to, the **Gyaru**s and **Riajuu**s were able to understand the **Otaku**s, so even as an **Otaku**, I was able to happily enjoy my high school life. It's scary to think about what would have happened if I'd gone to a **Riajuu**-filled school like the one Kashiwada goes to.

お前をオタクに
してやるから、
俺をリア充にしてくれ!

祝☆発売!

あかり
セーラー服
Ver.

妹の着替え
じろじろ見ないでくんない?

初めまして あなぽんと申します。
この度は、「オタリア」1巻を
お手に取っていただき ありがとう
ございます!

初めての挿絵の
お仕事で、とても
緊張しましたが
楽しく描かせて
いただきました。

これから柏田くんと 桃が
どうなっていくのか、とっても
楽しみです!
個人的に妹のあかりちゃん
が ドストライクなので
あかりちゃんとも
いちゃいちゃしたいです。

あなぽん

2011. 某日

When I think about how I will probably again make Kashiwada do the things I have personally experienced before, it will be nice if I can empathize with him and laugh at those things.

Which reminds me, in order to write this novel, I went to several places to do some research on the high school students of this era.

I went to the cultural festival, which had free entry, of a high school (actually my little sister's Alma Mater; and I actually kept it a secret from her), (later, my little sister found out and was creeped out though), and even at my adult age, for the sake of gathering data, I walked around the Takeshita Street in Harajuku which was filled with high school girls, endured the shame of buying 『Seventeen and 『Popteen at a bookstore, and wrote a spicy question like 『What's popular among high school students these days!? on a net question bulletin board..... even though I did all that, I couldn't use all of them in the novel (CRY).

If I'm allowed to published the next volume, then I want to use the data I collected then!

Finally, I really want to thank my editor-sama for working earnestly hard to make this novel, written by a newbie author who can't tell left from right, a good piece of work. I'll humbly be in your care again in the future.

To Anapon-sama who's drawing the wonderful illustrations for me, even though at this point in time, I've only seen the rough sketches and cover, when I first saw the rough sketches, I was blown away by the cuteness of Koigasaki and Hasegawa. I loved them so much that I immediately made them my PC desktop wallpaper. I'm so looking forward to the insert illustrations. Thank you very much.

And also, to Kojima Ajiko-sama who wrote the promotional wrapper slip. Really thank you for your words and impressions on the wrapper. Thanks to that, I was filled with even more motivation. To me, a reader of 801-chan, it's really like a dream.

And, to the readers of this book, thank you for reading this shoddy work. I plan to put in all my effort in writing something that's a notch more interesting in the future, so I look forward to your continued support.

Murakami Rin

Translator's Notes and References & OTARIA Glossary

1. ↑ **Bishoujo:** Literally "beautiful young girl". See here for more information. I left this untranslated because translating it to "beautiful/pretty young girl " is cumbersome, especially when it's used numerous times throughout the series. Moreover, it's a term used in many Otaku discussions throughout the series, and repeatedly translating " Bishoujo xxx" to "beautiful young girl games/types/ anime/blah-blah-blah" makes it even more cumbersome.

2. ↑ **Gyaru:** A transliteration of the English word, 'gal'. Used in Japanese, it does not just mean 'girl', but specifically refers to a young girl (and also to a subculture comprised of such girls) who's dressed in a fashionable, glamorous style, which often involves the use of man-made stuff like wigs, fake nails, fake eyelashes, colored contacts, heavy makeup, etc. See here for more info. I switched it back to **Gyaru** for explicit, native pronunciation purposes and to avoid ambiguity with 'gal'.

3. ↑ **TSUTAYA:** A chain of rental shops and bookstores. Here's how the online store looks like.

4. ↑ **Otaku:** Someone who's obsessively interested in anime, manga and video games to the point of lacking a social life. See here for more information. Sometimes translated to nerd; in the spirit of the series, I left it untranslated.

5. ↑ **Lolicon:** A person who has a lolita complex, that is, who finds young girls or females with child-like bodies sexually desirable. Of course, among Otakus, this usually applies to only 2D characters. See here for more information.

6. ↑ **Riajuu(リ):** Supposedly originating from 2ch boards and made up of the words リ(real/reality/real world) and (fulfilling), a Riajuu is literally a person who leads a fulfilling real life. Simplistically, it can be taken to be the opposite of Otaku. Broadly speaking, people who hang out with friends regularly, people with boy/girlfriends, people who are popular with their peers, etc. etc., are all considered Riajuus. There have been a multitude of fairly liberal translations for this term to date; in the

spirit of the series, it will be left untranslated.

7. ↑ **Sweet(LOL):** Essentially a transliteration of the internet slang, ス. It might be used without the (LOL). Sweet(LOL) essentially refers to a girl who is heavily influenced by mass media, such as magazines, TV, ads, etc. that are targeted towards women. (LOL) is often added, especially on sites like 2ch, to further remove ambiguity (on the 'sweet' part) and add emphasis to the 'sarcastic' nuance in the word.

8. ↑ **Galge:** Synonymous with Bishoujo games. See here for more information

9. ↑ **Doujinshi:** Amateur works like manga, art-books, games, music, novels, etc. They are usually based on a popular published work of any media (manga, novel, game, anime) and sometimes akin to fan-fiction. Majority of Doujinshi are erotic in nature (but not necessarily so).

10. ↑ **1000-yen-in-10 minutes:** In Japan, there are several chains of barbers/salons that offer 10-minute fast hair cuts at 1000 yen. You go into such a shop, insert a 1000 yen into a machine and get a ticket

with a queue number. Your haircut is done by a trained stylist and guaranteed to take no more than 10 minutes. While they don't offer anything fanciful like salons, it's actually a pretty decent cut. Some of these stores have set up operations outside of Japan.

11. ↑ **Bitch:** In Japanese. 'Bitches' = Sluts (girls who are loose). I left the word 'bitch' in instead of using sluts because if there's an anime, you will hear the word ' bitch'; to avoid hearing and reading inconsistencies.

12. ↑ **BL game:** BL = Boys' Love

13. ↑ **Fujoshi:** Literally rotten girl. Refers to an **Otaku** girl who's a fan of BL/homo/yaoi. See here for more info.

14. ↑ **LoveMinus:** Parody of LovePlus.

15. ↑ **K-ON!:** If you've never heard of K-ON!, then you shouldn't even be reading this series.

16. ↑ **Ani-song:** Short for 'anime song'.

17. ↑ **Vocaloids:** Vocaloid is originally a singing synthesizer technology from Yamaha. Since the

release and popularizing of Hatsune Miku, a singing synthesizer application (with a persona of the same name) that uses Vocaloid technology, personas (which use sampled voices of voice actors and actresses) with anime character designs from such applications have become icons in the Otaku culture , and have spun into various other Otaku merchandise. In this series, Vocaloid songs refer to songs synthesized with Hatsune Miku and other such similar applications. See here for more info

18. ↑ **Nico Nico Douga:** A video sharing site like Youtube. While not limited to Otaku content, a proportionately large amount of content caters to Otaku tastes, and much of the video comments are filled with Otaku slang and jargon often seen on 2ch (2channel) and 2chan (Futaba) boards. See here for more info.

19. ↑ **Freak Hunter:** Parody of Monster Hunter.

20. ↑ **(ry)**: or (略), is a way of abbreviating or omitting things out on the internet. It can be placed anywhere in a word or phrase or sentence as long as the omitted words are clear to the reader.

21. ↑ **Forever Over This Blue Sky:** A parody of The Promise I Made Over This Blue Sky.

22. ↑ **Eroge:** An erotic game or visual novel. Wiki 'eroge ' for more information.

23. ↑ **Gamers:** Similar to Animate. In fact, they belong to the same parent company.

24. ↑ **Taiē / Yōkatō:** Convenience stores.

25. ↑ **Sakuragoaka Girl's High School:** Fictional and not related to K-On!, but see K-On! anyway.

26. ↑ **Moe:** An **Otaku** term that you should have some inkling with if you are reading this. See here for more info.

27. ↑ **Yuri: Otaku** term for lesbians. See here for more info.

28. ↑ **"Are You an Idiott!? == Asuka" :** Watch more Evangelion and you will realize that this is what Asuka always call Shinji. Heck, there are several MADs on this.

29. ↑ **Tsundere:** An **Otaku** term that you should have some inkling with if you are reading this. See here for more info.

30. ↑ **Ikefukurou (lake owl) Statue:** It's an owl statue landmark in Ikebukuro station.

31. ↑ **Can-can Hat:** Google image it.

32. ↑ **Gyaru-Oh:** Male version of **Gyaru**. See here for more info.

33. ↑ **Circle:** Generically, the term **Circle** means a group or club, usually referring to an interest group. **Doujin Circle** = **Doujin** group. **Circle**s can be made up or 1 or more members (yes, it's possible to have only 1 member). I decided to retain the word **Circle** as the words, 'group' or 'club' is intuitively associated with multiple members, which may not be true for a **Doujin Circle**.

34. ↑ **Kimi ni Todoitara:** Parody of Kimi ni Todoke. Literally 'If it reaches you'.

35. ↑ **Shoujo:** Literally 'young girl'. See here for more info.